Should Writers Use They Own English

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Vershawn Ashanti Young: Should Writers Use They Own English?

What would a composition course based on the method I urge look like? [...] First, you must clear your mind of [the following...]: "We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style."

--Stanley Fish, "What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3."

Cultural critic Stanley Fish come talkin bout—in his three-piece New York Times "What Should Colleges Teach?" suit—there only one way to speak and write to get ahead in the world, that writin teachers should "clear [they] mind of the orthodoxies that have taken hold in the composition world" ("Part 3"). He say don't no student have a rite to they own language if that language make them "vulnerable to prejudice"; that "it may be true that the standard language is [...] a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students" (Fish "Part 3").

Lord, lord, lord! Where do I begin, cuz this man sho tryin to take the nation back to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences. Yeah, I said racial difference, tho my man Stan be talkin explicitly bout language differences. The two be intertwined. Used to be a time when a black person could get hanged from the nearest tree just cuz they be black. And they fingers and heads (double entendre intended) get chopped off sometimes. Stanley Fish say he be appalled at blatant prejudice, and get even madder at prejudice exhibited by those who claim it don't happen no mo (Fish "Henry Louis Gates"). And it do happen—as he know—when folks dont get no jobs or get fired or whatever cuz they talk and write Asian or black or with an Appalachian accent or sound like whatever ain the status quo. And Fish himself acquiesce to this linguistic prejudice when he come saying that people make themselves targets for racism if and when they dont write and speak like he do.

But dont nobody's language, dialect, or style make them "vulnerable to prejudice." It's ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people's language. Like the way some view, say, black English when used in school or at work. Black English dont make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views about other people usin they own language, like what Fish expressed in his NYT blog, that make it so.
The National Commission on Writing in 2001, the report called "Who Owns the Future?" which urges educators to value writing as a core competency. However, the report acknowledges that writing is often not valued as highly as other skills in many educational settings. The Commission notes that writing is crucial for effective communication in a globalized world, where students must be able to express ideas clearly and effectively in both written and oral forms.

In this global context, the Commission recommends that writing should be taught as a fundamental skill, not just as an adjunct to other courses. They argue that writing is essential for success in many fields, including business, law, science, and the arts. The Commission also notes that writing is a key component of critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making.

The Commission makes several recommendations for improving writing instruction, including:

1. Integrating writing into all courses and disciplines
2. Strengthening writing instruction in early grades
3. Providing professional development opportunities for teachers
4. Ensuring that assessment of writing is a valid measure of student learning
5. Increasing the visibility and importance of writing in higher education

The Commission concludes that writing is a fundamental skill that cannot be emphasized enough in today's world. They argue that if we want our students to be successful in the future, they must be able to communicate their ideas clearly and effectively in a variety of contexts.
the nation’s blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as $3.1 billion annually on remedial training” (A23).

Now, some peeps gone say this illustrate how Fish be rite, why we need to be teachin mo standard grammar and stuff. If you look at it from Fish view, yeah it mean that. But if you look at it from my view, it most certainly dont mean that. Instead, it mean that the one set of rules that people be applyin to everybody’s dialects leads to perceptions that writers need “remedial training” or that speakers of dialects are dumb. Teachin speakin and writin prescriptively, as Fish want, force people into patterns of language that aint natural or easy to understand. A whole lot of folk could be writin and speakin real, real smart if Fish and others stop using one prescriptive, foot-long ruler to measure the language of peeps who use a yard stick when they communicate.

Instead of prescribing how folks should write or speak, I say we teach language descriptively. This mean we should, for instance, teach how language function within and from various cultural perspectives. And we should teach what it take to understand, listen, and write in multiple dialects simultaneously. We should teach how to let dialects comingle, sho nuff blend together, like blending the dialect Fish speak and the black vernacular that, say, a lot—certainly not all—black people speak.

See, people be mo pluralingual than we wanna recognize. What we need to do is enlarge our perspective about what good writin is and how good writin can look at work, at home, and at school. The narrow, prescriptive lens be messin writer and readers all the way up, cuz we all been taught to respect the dominant way to write, even if we dont, cant, or wont ever write that one way ourselves. That be hegemony. Internalized oppression. Linguistic self-hate. But we should be mo flexible, mo acceptin of language diversity, language expansion, and creative language usage from ourselves and from others both in formal and informal settings. Why? Cuz nobody can or gone really master all the rules of any language or dialect.

So, what happen when peeps dont meet the dominant language rules? Well some folks can get away with not meeting those rules while others get punished sometimes severely, for not doing so. Let me go a lil mo way with this: Even university presidents and highly regarded English professors dont always speak and write in the dominant standard, even when they believe they do.

Remember when Fish put former Harvard President Lawrence Summers on blas in 2002? What had happened was, Summers called professor Cornell West to hi office and went straight off on the brotha for writin books everybody could read for writin clear, accessible scholarship. Summers apologized after the media go involved, sayin: “I regret any faculty member leaving a conversation feeling the are not respected” (qtd. in Fish, “Say It Ain’t So”). Fish say: “In a short, 13-word sentence, the chief academic officer of the highest ranked university in the country and therefore in the entire world, has committed three grammatical crimes, failure to mark the possessive case, failure to specify the temporal and the causal relationship between the conversations he has and the effects he regrets, and failure to observe noun-pronoun agreement” (“Say It Ain’t So”).

But get this: Fish’s correction of Summers is suspect, according to a gramma
translating one dialect into another one. It's blendin two or more dialects, languages, or rhetorical forms into one sentence, one utterance, one paper. And not all the time is this blend intentional, sometime it unintentional. And that's the point. The two dialects sometime naturally, sometime intentionally, co-exist! This is code switching from a linguistic perspective: two languages and dialects co-existing in one speech act (Auer).

But since so many teachers be Jackin up code switching with they "speak this way at school and a different way at home," we need a new term. I call it CODE MESHING!

Code meshing is the new code switching; it's multdialectalism and plurilingualism in one speech act, in one paper.

Let me drop some code meshing knowledge on y'all.

Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts.

This mode of communication be just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers. It be used by writers of color to compose full-length books; and it's sometimes added intentionally to standard English to make the point that there aint no one way to communicate.

Code meshing also be used to add flavor and style, like journalist Tomas Palermo do in the excerpt below from his interview with Jamal Cooks, professor of Education. In his online article "Rappin about Literacy Activism," Palermo write:

Teachers frequently encounter him on panels with titles like "The Expanding Canon: Teaching Multicultural Literature In High School." But the dude is also hella down to earth. He was in some pretty successful "true-school" era hip-hop recording groups [...]. Meet the man who made it his passion to change the public education game, one class at a time.

With vernacular insertions such as "but the dude is also hella down to earth" (not to mention beginning a sentence with the conjunction but) and adding the colloquial game to "public education," the article, otherwise composed in mono-dialect standard English, shift into a code meshed text.

Here some mo examples:

(1) Iowa Republican Senator Chuck Grassley sent two tweets to President Obama in June 2009 (Werner). His messages blend together common txmg abbrvs., standard English grammar and a African American rhetorical technique:

First Tweet: "Pres Obama you got nerve while u sightseeing in Paris to tell us 'time to deliver' on health care. We still on skedul/ even workinWKEND."
Second Tweet: "Pres Obama while u sightseeing in Paris u said 'time to delivr on healthcare' When you are a 'hammer' u think everything is NAIL I'm no NAIL."

(2) Professor Kermit Campbell uses multiple dialects to compose Gettin' Our
Middle-class aspirations and an academic career have rubbed off on me. I'm not sure if my parents ever fully understood my love for English, but they've been proud of me nonetheless. I've always been interested in the language and its nuances, which is why I've chosen to pursue a career in academic writing.

However, there are times when I feel that the traditional approach to teaching English is outdated. In my opinion, the emphasis on grammar and spelling is more important than it should be. Students should be encouraged to express their thoughts and ideas freely, without worrying about the rules of the language.

I recently read an article by Richard Rodman, a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. In his piece, he discusses the role of oral communication in the development of language. He argues that the use of slang and colloquialisms is essential to modern language, and that teachers should incorporate these elements into their teaching methods.

Another interesting point made by Rodman is that the use of language is not only about communication, but also about identity. He suggests that using slang and colloquialisms can help students to express their cultural heritage and identity.

In conclusion, I believe that the traditional approach to teaching English is outdated. Teachers should focus on helping students to express their thoughts and ideas freely, without worrying about the rules of the language. Additionally, incorporating the use of slang and colloquialisms can help students to express their cultural heritage and identity.
fessors of language and writin studies, no less—who code mesh.

Still, Fish may say, “Yeah, but look, they paid their dues. Those professors knew the rules of writin before they broke them.” To this objection, Victor Villanueva, a Puerto Rican scholar of American studies, as well as language and literacy, point to “writers of color who have been using the blended form […] from the get-go” (351). As he put it, “The blended form is our dues” (351). They dont have to learn to the rules to write rite first; the blended form or code meshing is writin rite.

This brings us back to Senator Grassley’s tweets. It’s obvious he learned some cool techno-shorthand (e.g., “WKEND” and “delivr”). He also uses both the long spelling of you and the abbrv. “u” in the same line. “We still on skedul” is a complete sentence; the backslash (“\”) that follow it function like a semicolon to connect the emphatic fragment to the previous thought. And the caps in “WKEND” and “NAIL” pump up the words with emphasis, which alleviates the need for formal exclamation marks.

Grassley’s message be a form of loud-talking—a black English device where a speaker indirectly insults an authority figure. The authority figure is meant to overhear the conversation (thus loud-talking) so that the insult can be defended as unintentional. Grassley sent the message over his Twitter social network but he address Obama. He wanna point out what seem like a contradiction: If healthcare reform is so important to Obama, why is he sightseeing in Paris?

Grassley didnt send no standard English as a tweet. Twitter allow messages with 140 characters. The standard English question—if healthcare reform is so important to Obama, why is he sightseeing in Paris—is 80 characters. Why didnt Grassley use this question or compose one like it? Cuz all kinds of folks know, understand, and like code meshing. So Grassley code meshed.

Code meshing be everywhere. It be used by all types of people. It allow writers and speakers to bridge multiple codes and modes of expression that Fish say disparate and unmixable. The metaphorical language tool box be expandin, baby. Plus code meshing benefit everybody.

In the 1970’s linguist William Labov noted that black students were ostracized because they spoke and wrote black dialect. Yet he noted that black speakers were more attuned to argumentation. Labov say that “in many ways [black] working-class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners, and debaters than many middle-class [white] speakers, who temporize, qualify, and lose their argument in a mass of irrelevant detail” (qtd in Graft 37).

So when we teach the rhetorical devices of blacks we can add to the writing proficiency of whites and everybody else. Now, that’s something, aint it? Code meshing use the way people already speak and write and help them be more rhetorically effective. It do include teaching some punctuation rules, attention to meaning and word choice, and various kinds of sentence structures and some standard English. This mean too that good writin gone look and sound a bit different than some may now expect.

And another real, real, good result is we gone help reduce prejudice. Yes, marm. Now that’s a goal to reach for.

Works Cited