In Defense of Babbling: How Conversation Improves Writing and Promotes Literacy

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> "Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation."
>
> – Michael Oakeshott

At a recent Christmas party in Philadelphia, I was yanked into a casual discussion as a de facto expert on the sad state of America's English skills. A television producer visiting from California couldn't understand the slang used in his kid's emails. A law professor cursed at his students' inability to put together a coherent sentence. A human resources manager complained of shoddy office communications. Their minds were made up when they asked for my opinion. They wanted me to agree with them, to take up the good fight and push back against deteriorating standards. They looked to me for assurance that English professors around the world were working furtively on some plan that would reset the mind of America and bring us back to some Victorian age of ornate hand-written letters.

When I told them the Ivory Tower had no such plan in the works, they were disappointed. I tried to convince them that English was not deteriorating, but evolving. They scoffed. I told them that the sky was not falling. Other languages have made dramatic, long-term transformations. When Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*, he did so in what was then seen as a vulgar dialect, a lower-class version of Latin we now call Italian (Elbow,

"Vernacular Englishes" 1). Latin changed over time as areas developed new dialects and pronunciations, expanding the lexicon to fit Italy's geography and culture. English may be going through a similar change influenced by popular culture, computer-mediated communication, regional dialects, world Englishes, pidgin languages, etc., all of which threaten to destabilize the status quo that my party friends were clearly trying to uphold.

I was unable to convince them, though I am not surprised why. The dominant mentality believes that those who do not employ Standard Edited American English (SEAE) are either stupid, lazy, or both. Though scholars (Anzaldúa, Heath, Villanueva, etc.) have done much to counter this mentality in their writings and classrooms, students that leave the university will find themselves confronted with an ugly stigma should their language use stray from the accepted standard. This puts teachers in a heartbreaking position; we know that the academy alone is not equipped to change a national (arguably global) perception, but we are not willing to put students through a linguistic boot camp that tears down their preferred language variety and replaces it with SEAE. This dilemma was the focus of the CCCC's *Students' Right to Their Own Language* (SRTOL). The committee determined that promoting acceptance of dialects would slowly improve the culture of literacy outside the university when students who have been made aware of this issue later find themselves in positions of power once they graduate (14). One question posed by the SRTOL statement asks teachers to "sensitize their students to the options they already exercise, particularly in speaking, so as to help them gain confidence in communicating in a variety of situations . . . in short, to do what they are already doing, better" (11). This paper addresses one possibility for sensitizing students to their language use by asking them to use their natural ability with speech as a resource for their writing.

Conversation as Language

Everyone agrees that writing is difficult, even excruciating for some of its most experienced practitioners. Knowing the pain

Hemingway went through when revising the final pages of *A Farewell to Arms* is a comfort to many. Knowing that others share similar frustrations with the simplest of emails lets everyone know that we're all pushing through the same sludge in order to get at what we want to say. This is empowering. Why should any writer worry about his or her struggles when every writer struggles? *My* contention, however, is that we shouldn't have to surrender to the idea that writing, if it is to be worth anything, must be an unavoidably difficult task. My hope is that we can make writing easy and fluent for everyone without losing effectiveness or clarity. I see a partial solution by way of speech, which I'll argue is our most prolific source of communication and as such can be utilized as an enormous resource for writing when coupled with thoughtful revision.

In opposition to the forethought we put into writing, the carelessness with which we converse is the result of years of practice. Not everyone writes everyday, but we all speak everyday. Except in rare cases, we produce more speech in a lifetime than we do writing. The proliferation of speech does two things: first, we become very good at reading the contextual clues of a conversation so that if we stumble or make an ambiguous point, we can "revise" what we said. Second, we become less careful with speaking because we know if we stumble, we can fall back and modify our utterances. These two factors are reversed in writing: first, the lack of an immediate audience reaction as we write means we must imagine for ourselves, to some extent, an appropriate role in the conversation. Second, because there is a lag between writing and response, we write more carefully, knowing that readers only have the words on the page to go on—we can't provide supplemental support.

I'd like to broaden our notion of writing to include the better parts of speaking that make speech so free, usable, productive, and contextually-rooted. I believe doing so opens new avenues for students to engage more fully with their writing and with the learning process. I refer to this kind of writing as being *infused* with speech. The purpose of infusing speech with writing removes

some of the impediments to productive thought that make writing difficult. It asks students to speak their words directly to the page, as close as they can in simulating conversational transcription, with all the accompanying skips, pauses, slang, fragments, run-ons, mumblings, and babbling. The carelessness with which we can utter ideas in conversation make speech-infused writing a useful strategy to get everything down in the same way that freewriting attempts to simulate a generative stream-of-consciousness. After the speech has been put to paper we can invite students to revise into SEAE while maintaining the feeling of speech—the sounds, the voice, the style, the inflection.

The inclusion that I speak of asks us to accept dialects and writing forms that are normally excluded from academic discourse on the basis that, according to Peter Elbow's *Enlisting Speaking and Spoken Language for Writing*, "standardized edited written English is no one's mother tongue" (2). In a sense, then, SEAE is a kind of second language that we must all acquire if we are going to participate in the academic discourse community. Elbow, whose breadth of work on this subject closely fits the SRTOL statement, uses a gear metaphor to explain the differences between our level of care with speaking and writing; we can write or speak in both a *self-monitoring gear* and a *spontaneous gear* (emphasis added, 4). Speech-infused writing is interested in applying the spontaneous speaking gear when writing opening drafts. We see this gear used in writing that feels as though it were transcribed without any concern for standard syntax and grammar. Such writing feels more personable—as though we're hearing it from the author's mouth. A written sentence like "Lemme ax u a question," has the same linguistic function as "Let me ask you a question," but operates using an alternate rule system that carries much of the writer's identity and character. By accepting these alternate rule systems, or dialects, of students' writing and speech, we not only promote a more student-centered learning environment, but we open a door to new language possibilities and variations of expression, both for the student to use and for the teacher to experience. By raising awareness of these various rule systems, we

can show students that the literacies they bring to class form a valuable patchwork of diversity.

We can see how these variations of expression have similar functions if we accept SRTOL's claim that "initial difficulties of perception can be overcome and should not be confused with those psychological barriers to communication which may be generated by racial, cultural and social differences and attitudes" (4). It isn't difficult to translate between "Lemme ax u" and "Let me ask you," though there may be a brief cognitive skip as we read it. However, the process of translating someone's dialect phrase into our own dialect (remember, SEAE is no one's natural dialect) requires us to think about and accept the speaker's/writer's background. For this acceptance of dialects to work properly, we first have to ask ourselves whether the subject of the composition classroom is SEAE or student growth, and, more importantly, whether we need to choose in the first place.

Conversation as Inclusion

Elbow's examination of teachers' loyalty conflict between subject and student directly influences whether or not speech-infused writing will find a home in a dialect-friendly classroom. In describing the danger that occurs when teachers place student above subject, Elbow suggests that such "soft" teachers may "undermine the integrity of the subject matter . . . and thereby drain value from" the learning experience ("Embracing Contraries" 66). I believe such a view of student-focused learning is well-intentioned, but shortsighted. It suggests that soft-trained students will exit the university, not knowing the acceptable rule system of SEAE and will be subsequently ejected from other, more discriminating discourse communities, not to mention the difficulty they will have finding employment. I believe instead we can expand (not to be confused with lowering) our standards to include speech-infused writing *as* we promote SEAE. We give *as* we take (68). We engage students in a dialogue about their linguistic identity instead of grading it away with critical comments on early drafts. Promoting meta-linguistic awareness

forms an important foundation for students as they carry out work, revising and understanding their language's relationship with SEAE. Between student and subject, there is no conflicting loyalty. When it comes to literacy, the student *is* the subject.

When we accept speech-infused writing, we invite into the classroom the varied backgrounds of students instead of convicting them for their prior literacies before they enter the university. Students will be more willing to examine their language use when we validate their dialects through discourse and show them that their dialects are a source of strength. Valerie Felita Kinloch's "Revisiting the Promise of *Students' Right to Their Own Language*: Pedagogical Strategies" describes what happens when students are given the freedom to use and acknowledge their language. Although Kinloch makes no mention of promoting the kind of writing argued for in this paper, her series of classroom discussions present students actively engaged with their literacy, a prerequisite to speech-infused writing. By the end of the semester, Kinloch's students "agreed that to be on or at the margins does not have to mean that students are 'linguistically inferior' or 'underprepared'" (100). These classroom vignettes show us the kind of dialogue that we need if students are to take a more active role in their language construction. Countering years of language-stigmatization in order to promote writing confidence is not an easy task, however, and requires us to shift our priorities from a top-down perspective of language standards implemented by the teacher toward a bottom-up perspective that acknowledges and uses students' inherent literacies.

To explain the kind of shift I'm proposing, I draw your attention to first-year writing students, eagerly or apathetically entering their first composition class. It shouldn't be hard to imagine how a teacher's perceptions of literacy will influence their motivation to succeed, learn, or write. If their first experiences with the university show them that the way they talk is not valuable when applied to writing, even the most motivated student will be disheartened. After all, these students have been communicating with speech for roughly sixteen years and feel they

are pretty damn good at it. Simply tolerating their literacy differences is not good enough. If we actively invite their dialect as a composing tool in the opening rounds of the process, we can show them how to see their naturally occurring, pre-academy skills as valuable in conducting the kind of academic work that standard-bearers and employers value, all the while developing lively writing that speaks to readers.

Conversation as Socialization

If we view writing as a series of problems with various solutions, it should be clear that our skills with speech are easily applicable to writing situations. Though the differences between speech and writing are numerous, they are both used for similar reasons. I don't intend to claim that speech is a stronger mode of learning, nor is it more apt to solve communication problems. Speech-infused writing will not change writers overnight. However, if we fuse those elements of speech that make communication easy with the cognitive strengths of the writing process, I believe the hybrid that is produced will not only make students more effective writers in the long run but also legitimize their current language. If we encourage writing that more closely resembles conversation, we should see students who are more engaged with a learning process that uses language in ways that they are currently familiar with.

It is clear why students are more comfortable *telling* you what they think about *Moby Dick* instead of *writing* a five-page paper. Not only do students use speech every day, but if they were to verbally explain their ideas about the book, they would not be subject to the indelible shame that accompanies critical comments on their papers. At best, we nod with the student, add our own contribution, and continue the conversation. At worst, we politely disagree. For most people, speaking carries a freedom from criticism. Of course people disagree, often passionately at times, but because we speak so frequently and under the protection of a safe classroom environment we understand better how to cope with verbal criticism and feel protected.

Elbow has said that "virtually every human child masters the essential elements of a rich, intricate, and complex language by age four; but somehow it turns out (in our culture at least), that this language is not considered acceptable for serious important writing" ("Coming to See Myself" 3). This view of speech, I suspect, is shared by many teachers in theory, but is pushed aside once a student submits a draft that sounds as though the words were spoken directly onto the page, often with the same careless abandon that accompanies casual speech.

After receiving an ink-stained draft, how often have we heard students offer up the "I-write-like-I-talk" defense? And why shouldn't they? Mark Twain made a living writing in the vernacular style of his characters. When students use vernacular, however, they do so without Twain's literary artifice–they write like they talk. Vernacular writing more closely resembles the utterances and conversations of its users. These written utterances often conflict with the rule system of SEAE, but they are perfectly capable of expressing the same ideas. Many students feel more comfortable writing with their vernacular instead of translating it into SEAE because they are more accustomed to speaking *to each other* than to us. Mikhail Bahktin's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* shows us why students, when searching for an appropriate audience as they write, naturally default to their vernacular rather than translate their ideas for the teacher:

> In the majority of cases, we presuppose a certain typical and stabilized *social purview* toward which the ideological creativity of our own social group and time is oriented, i.e., we assume as our addressee a contemporary of our literature, our science, our moral and legal codes. (emphasis author's, 1215)

Perhaps, then, by emphasizing and drawing awareness to students' literacies, we can present ourselves as sympathetic addressees, taking one step toward students as we ask them to step toward us. In the case of vernacular writing, the social

purview consists of the student writer's discourse community. Writing resembles a dialogue because we are permanently embedded and participating in an ongoing conversation before, during, and after we write.

We write to insert ourselves into this conversation, knowing that the carefully written exchange of ideas models what occurs naturally in conversation. I am best able to fine-tune my ideas with writing, but I can't get anywhere close to that point without a lengthy conversation–I am wholly dependent on others to act as an ad hoc oversight committee before I begin writing. Even introverted students who don't speak during discussions are able to participate by actively listening or using body language to contribute. The power of conversation as a learning mode is ubiquitous, because, as Bakhtin tells us, "*Any utterance*, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, *is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication*" (emphasis author's, 1221). This infinite series of utterances, socially connected to the human experience, forms our basis of progress as ideas are exchanged. This explains why we compare academic writing to the idea of a never-ending conversation.

We tell students that their writing is part of a larger, ongoing discussion, one that continues beyond class conversations. Once their writing begins, however, the free exchange of ideas is hindered by the translation processes involved in converting their speech into writing and revising that writing to retain its speech characteristics. Because SEAE writing is not simply speech put to page (Emig 123) but rather a complex translation process, writers must convert their conversational thoughts to a form more appropriate for writing. Discussion becomes a safe way to exchange ideas, but the exchange ends when the writer, in solitude, begins writing. If writing intends to function as a continuation of an idealized intellectual conversation, then it seems fitting to include elements of speech into that conversation. Kenneth Bruffee examines how conversation functions on a cognitive and social level in *Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind*,' arguing that:

> To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively–that is, we must learn to converse well. The first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better and learning to establish and maintain the sorts of social context, the sorts of community life, that foster the sorts of conversation members of the community value. (421)

Teachers, as gatekeepers of the academic community, determine what kinds of conversations are valued. But teachers are not the only members of the academic community, and our success depends largely on how we converse with our students. If we agree with Bruffee's social constructivist approach, then the conversations that we have students perform, both written and spoken, not only constitute an immense source of cognitive development, but also form the roots of how we understand ourselves in relation to others.

Conversation as Writing

What this amounts to is the inclusion of a writer's voice. The metaphor of voice in composition has, according to many, lost steam over the years. One of the reasons why voice has been discredited is that it is too vague for students to grasp (*Voice in Writing* 12). Voice means too much to too many and therefore means nothing to anyone. But the power of the voice metaphor, like variations in computer-mediated communication, lies in its ambiguity, providing an idea that allows students to take *ownership* of their writing. When we discuss voice with our students, extolling the power that it brings to their writing, students have choices. Voice can mean identity, selfhood, ego, individuality or dialect. Take the following example from Geneva Smitherman in which she refers to *CCC's* response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "[F]or the first time, race/Color as a central component of linguistic difference became an in-yo-face issue that the organization could no longer ignore" (355). Here we have an instance of conversational scholarship using a vernacular

dialect. But what of the inherent conflict between vernacular writing and SEAE? With attention to appropriate revision in SEAE, we can show students that vernacular writing carries their voice and expresses delivery in ways that might mirror their speech.

Classical rhetoric's focus on delivery is undervalued in the writing classroom. We have assumed that delivery is incompatible with writing. A student cannot use hand gestures, speak softly, or smile when they write, and so scholars have discounted delivery as part of the writing process (Bizzell and Herzberg 7). But what if there were writing analogs to hand gestures? What if there were ways, through written words sitting silently on a page, to show the reader a smile? Wouldn't these techniques prove valuable in bridging the gap between speech and writing by providing embodied context clues?

Building on the legacy of Bakhtin, Walter Ong explains in "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction" how speech is more than the simple transfer of information; it is a context-dependent situation. You can read this paper, but unless you hear the words spoken, with all the attenuating body language providing cues for your interpretation, you cannot truly understand what you hear, even though you might understand the social context of why it was written. Ong claims that "except for a small corps of highly trained writers, most persons could get into written form few if any of the complicated and nuanced meanings they regularly convey orally" (57). The suggestion here (and I am, of course, interpreting Ong's written words without hearing his inflections) is that the addition of "nuanced meanings" is preferable, if only more people could do it. But everyone can do it already if we aren't writing *solely* for SEAE. When we are conscious of voice, delivery, vernacular, and speech intonations, we can convey those oral meanings in writing, *and* keep them after revision.

Conversation as Assignment

Part of my reasoning for wanting these modes to be combined comes from my early experiences as a professor. I allowed no

room for conversational writing in my students' research papers. I thought the personable writing style of some students was incompatible with standard academic discourse. It got to the point where I was writing "too conversational" in the margins so frequently that a student suggested I write "lips" as shorthand. How frustrated I would become when the revisions of those sentences came back still and lifeless. What was I expecting? I have since revised this practice and now see snippets of casual writing as opportunities, with revision, for the development of voice.

What would our students' writing look like if we combined the elements of speaking with, say, the common research essay? Post-process theories refute the notion of a writer locked in a room, working in solitude with nothing but the imaginative faculty driving the words. Even in that room, the world speaks with the writer. If we intend to celebrate writing as conversation, students would need to respond to each other, the teacher, or both. The conversation would need to be integrated into the course as a written product for evaluation. Imagine an assignment that uses blogging in which students construct an opening statement to a problem/question/issue, etc. and respond to each other the way scholars currently do. Students would be able to quote from their peers' papers and though the assignment would necessarily end due to the limits of the semester, the conversation could continue indefinitely as do our professional discussions. When completed, the entire conversation would be graded as one assignment instead of as a series of short papers. The written interaction creates a conversational style that showcases the writers' voices.

An additional benefit of conversational assignments is that we no longer have to play pretend by asking students to fictionalize a readership (although Ong's theory of a fictionalized audience for rhetorical purposes would still apply). Their readership will be sitting next to them, reflecting ideas and adding to the multi-voiced work.

Conversational assignments blur the line between process and product in that the student writes multiple threads of a single

discussion instead of submitting one paper. Each utterance of the thread is contextualized within the larger conversation and generated as an exploration of the central idea. As the conversation progresses, writers are able to fine-tune their ideas when responses elicit further explication. Initial positions wouldn't be revised, but that's okay, because the topic is still the same and each utterance (or blog post) means a new attempt for the author to get it right. Once the conversation is finished (by whatever arbitrary mechanism), students can draft and revise a final statement paper that allows them to use previous posts while revising their overall position. The written conversation, however, shouldn't be seen as the final product nor should it be discarded in lieu of the position paper. The totality of the conversation, each utterance, each post, as well as the final paper would be graded as a whole.

Mingling speech with writing is not simply a pedagogical tool or an additional assignment, but asks teachers to modify their thinking about the nature of writing and the nature of the writer. Speech should be seen as a tool to be used *during* writing. We compose when we speak, even when we babble nonsense to each other or ourselves. Babbling gets our ideas out of our head and changes the way we think once we've heard them out loud. Babbling functions similarly to Elbow's strategy of freewriting; babbling could be thought of as freespeaking. Freewriting leaves a permanent record of thought, but babbling has even less commitment as the sound waves dissipate the moment they leave our rambling lips ("Shifting Relationships" 285). Babbling also differs from freewriting in that it works *best* when people hear it and are able to babble back. If we embrace lateral thinking during the speech process and open ourselves to new possibilities, we should see effects similar to freewriting. Janet Emig has said (has written?) that it is a mistake to view writing as simply a record of talk (123), but if we were able to record the nuances of talk as composition, wouldn't the result be more accessible than writing alone? Don't we connect more closely with writing that functions

as a conversation, eagerly awaiting our participation instead of writing that treats us as a passive ear in a lecture-hall?

What shall I tell my friends at the next Christmas party? Their perception of the purpose of English varies wildly from those of us that teach it. My elite friends feel it is the students' responsibility to conform to the economic realities facing them when they leave school, abandoning their home language, or at least developing a passable disguise to wear in public. There is only so much we can do to counter this mentality. The academy functions as an intermediary, working whatever good it can on students until they are sent back into a world that will likely be critical of their backgrounds. This discussion, therefore, must extend beyond journals and classrooms. When Kinloch tells us "*current professional documents and policies* that seek to affirm student differences in dialects and language patterns must consider the *work that occurs inside and outside of classrooms* as well as the work of literacy education in general," (emphasis mine, 87), I can only think that the reverse must be equally important.

Next Christmas, perhaps I'll print out copies of this paper for my friends. Where my flustered speech was unable to persuade them, this paper, originally a jumbled mess of slang, fragments, and goofy tangents (including one about the power of smiley faces), is now more carefully thought out and fine-tuned. My speech-infused writing may succeed where my speech about writing failed. If nothing else, it should get the discussion going again.

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