EBONICS AND COMPOSITION: EXTENDING DISCIPLINARY CONVERSATIONS TO FIRST-YEAR WRITING STUDENTS

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This essay discusses the findings of a teacher-research study that draws upon Afrocentric curricular approaches to teaching first-year composition. The purpose of presenting these findings is to create spaces for all students to discuss issues associated with Ebonics in first-year writing classrooms. Using students' essay responses on topics related to Ebonics and Composition Studies, the essay also argues that writing teachers can use these topics as an opportunity to teach revision and research citation practices.

Discussions of Ebonics[1] have become quite common in essays published in *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, the *Journal of Advanced Composition*, *The Journal of Basic Writing*, and many other journals in Composition Studies. While taking a cursory glance at this essay's title, perhaps readers might be thinking, we done heard this befo'! And to echo what Geneva Smitherman already done said, "it seem like everybody and they momma done had something to say on the subject!" (227). Maybe I'd add that everybody and they momma in the public sector (remember the December 1996 recording on CNN's *Talk Back Live*?[2]), everybody and they momma in sociolinguistics, everybody and they momma in Composition Studies, everybody and they momma–*except* the students in our first-year writing classrooms since many of these students are unfamiliar with the field of Composition Studies or its discussions of Ebonics. It is quite ironic that none of my own first-year students had heard of Ebonics as a legitimate linguistic system, and none of them knew that

Composition Studies was a field of study prior to taking my first-year composition course. As a teacher of first-year writing, I wondered what might happen if instead of going from language workshop to language workshop arguing with other writing teachers about best pedagogies for implementing Ebonics into course curricula, I introduced my own students to Ebonics and the discipline of Composition Studies. If I used Composition Studies as a lens to explore issues of Ebonics and pedagogy, what would my own students' interpretations of the work scholars have done and need to do with Ebonics offer the field of Composition Studies? In essence, what can first-year writing students learn about the state of Ebonics in our disciplinary pedagogical discussions?

To address these queries, I designed an Afrocentric first-year writing course at Michigan State University, "Writing: The Ethnic and Racial Experience," to explore issues of Ebonics. I find conversations about Ebonics to be a useful space for disciplinary discussion because most students are familiar (to some degree) with the ways they code-switch and negotiate language practices within the academy and amongst their friends, and Ebonics can serve as a useful topic for investigating linguistic choices–including code-switching–that speakers and writers make in various communicative contexts and writing situations. Although it is quite plausible that one could discuss Ebonics in the composition classroom without making the topic the center of scholarly discourse in the classroom, I argue that positioning Ebonics as the focus of scholastic inquiry is critical because it offers students a concrete example of how educators can work to counter linguistic prejudice (Perryman-Clark 117). While Ebonics is the subject of inquiry for this class, I also acknowledge that alternative language varieties used by ethnic minority groups across the United States (Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, etc.) can be used to help students understand linguistic concepts like code-switching, the communicator's ability to switch back and forth between two or more language variety systems; bidialectalism, the communicator's fluency in two language variety systems; and

code-meshing, the communicator's ability to blend multiple language variety systems more naturally in conversation than code-switching may often permit; and further encourage such explorations as informed by composition educators in the classroom. When designing courses centered on Ebonics, however, "I particularly encourage students to make overt connections between African American communicative practices and literacies, and their own literacy experiences as they investigate personal literacy practices, online literacy practices, and disciplinary literacy practices" (117). Thus, a focus on Ebonics becomes a heuristic for understanding the ways that different racial and ethnic backgrounds communicate across communicative contexts.

In essence, this essay argues that writing teachers use topics pertaining to Composition Studies and Ebonics as opportunities to teach the revision of essay arguments and research citation practices. Although first-year writing instructors need not assign texts on Ebonics from scholars in Composition Studies to teach writing and research, doing so, I believe, can encourage student participation in the conversations that scholars have when discussing Ebonics. Doing so can also provide insight that may not be provided within the conversations that we as teachers and scholars have amongst ourselves. To support this essay's argument, I present common trends in students' written responses to how Composition Studies discusses Ebonics in disciplinary conversations. Using excerpts from students' essays, I will point to places where instructors might advise students to revise essay arguments and research practices. The essay concludes by offering implications for acknowledging student participation in the field.

A Pedagogical Rationale for Using Composition Studies to Teach Students about Writing

Some instructors might question the need for students to engage disciplinary scholarship in their writing courses just

because writing instructors may find it useful to engage in our disciplinary discourses. In *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*, Elizabeth Wardle and Douglas Downs argue that there are many advantages to studying writing (and Composition Studies) in a writing course, two of which I find especially relevant:

> [Students] already have a great deal of experience with writing and reading, so [they] are more knowledgeable investigator[s] of these subjects than . . . of a lot of others.
>
> Doing research on writing will give [students] the opportunity to contribute knowledge about [the] subject, not simply gather and repeat what lots of other people have already said. (2)

I would also add that encouraging students to draw from texts in Composition Studies may help students examine relationships between disciplinary scholarship and their own writing because it provides students with a language to talk about writing. I find that teaching students how to develop a language for discussing writing is useful for first-year writing students' communicative processes, both written and oral. Developing a language to discuss writing may help students develop the skills necessary to improve their own writing by transferring knowledge about writing to the additional rhetorical contexts and purposes they are often called upon to explore through the act of writing. In short, encouraging students to make connections with our disciplinary conversations and their own writing can serve effectively as a pedagogical tool for using composition scholarship to teach students about the quality of the arguments they compose.

A Rationale for Using Afrocentric Curriculum Design to Teach about Ebonics

Because most first-year writing curricula that use a rhetorical frame focus on teaching traditional rhetorical analysis (e.g., purpose, audience, subject, argument) and Standard English, as a

teacher-researcher, I wanted to investigate what would happen if an Afrocentric approach were used instead of current traditional models of instruction. In order to study African American contributions to Composition Studies concerning Ebonics (not that African American scholars are the only ones who be writin' on the subject!), I designed an Afrocentric first-year writing course because "Ebonics *is* a set of communication patterns and practices resulting from Africans' appropriation and transformation of a foreign tongue during the African Holocaust" (Smitherman *Talkin that Talk* 19). In "African American English and Writing Assessment: An Afrocentric Approach," Sandra Kamusikiri defines an Afrocentric approach (in relationship to the study of Ebonics and writing assessment) as one "in which both student and teacher are informed about the history and tradition of AAE and the student writer and his or her peers understand that AAE is a valid language choice when appropriate to the subject, audience, and purpose of the essay" (202). She further adds, while quoting James Haskins and Hugh F. Butts:

> By adopting an Afrocentric approach to writing assessment, teachers can appreciate the linguistic virtuosity of AAE speakers and see them "as people who have brought, originated, and transmitted certain unique mores and values to create a culture that has survived continual efforts to annihilate it."(202)

As Kamusikiri demonstrates, an Afrocentric approach (including one that considers writing assessment) takes into account the ways that Afrocentricity is tied to language, and language to culture. In order to provide Ebonics with the full agency it deserves, then, one must position its discussion in line with African and African American worldviews. Because language is cultural, an understanding of the "Africaness" associated with Ebonics is also necessary. Thus, for me to teach students about Ebonics, I needed to design Afrocentric curricular and pedagogical approaches.

Context of Study: Extending Conversations to Our Students

This teacher-research study reports major trends in students' formal essay responses to assignment two during my Spring 2007 Afrocentric first-year writing course (see Appendix). Students self-enrolled in a racial and ethnic theme-based course, titled, Writing: The Ethnic and Racial Experience. Although students knew that the content would be geared toward focusing on one or more racial and/or ethnic groups, students did not know that the focus of the course would be on Ebonics prior to enrolling. While some students admitted that they were initially pessimistic about taking a course on Ebonics, nearly every student who completed the course wrote or explicitly said that they saw the value in taking such a course in their final course reflections.

To complete this assignment, students were assigned essays, chapters, and articles written primarily by African American scholars in Composition Studies between 1970 and 2000.[3] They were then asked to do research in various academic journals in Composition Studies, on more recent conversations from 2000 to 2007. After conducting the research, students were asked to make an argument about the way Composition Studies' scholarship addresses Ebonics and how these conversations have changed over time. Excerpts were selected, based on students' informed consent, to reflect appropriately the common trends in students' responses

Discussion of Findings

The discussions of my first-year writing students' interpretations of how Ebonics is discussed in Composition Studies will illustrate the following trends based on what students claim to know about Ebonics and the field: the move from discussions of eradicationism to bidialectalism and/or code-switching in the field, and the problems that continue to arise from both; an acknowledgement that some progress has been made, but a need exists for more progress; the need for more

explicit pedagogical strategies to be used for teaching Ebonics-speaking students; and recommendations for explicit pedagogical strategies. With regard to the pedagogical implications for teaching research and argument, I point to potential areas for encouraging students to revise and support their arguments.

Like many scholars writing about Ebonics, one common trend existing among data from my students' essays is the claim that *some* progress has been made. Because many teachers and scholars in Composition Studies are now familiar with Ebonics being a legitimate linguistic system (regardless of whether or not they actually subscribe to this practice), students identified moves in our disciplinary scholarship from theories of eradicationism of Ebonics to bidialectalism and/or code-switching in the field. Here is one example that explicates such a move:

> *Bidialectism has been the solution to teaching AAVE students since the 1970s. [Rebecca Howard Moore] strongly disagrees with using bidialectism, which will be discussed later on in this paper, but the attitude in which it has been used has changed greatly over the years. At first the teacher was encouraged to code-switch to help the student make the transition into using Standard English. This would be beneficial to the student(s) making the transition because it does not put a negative connotation on using AAVE, since the teacher is [not] using it. But … the attitude in the field changed:*
>
> > Bidialectalists postulate that Black English is equal to Standard English but not quite equal enough. They acknowledge that the language variety is not inferior linguistically or conceptually but, claiming to be pragmatic, they feel that Standard English must be mastered by Black children in the schools so that these children can keep the possibility of upward mobility alive. (Howard 265)

Code-switching was still in use but it was no longer the teachers that used it making it seem as though it is 'ignorant' or 'just not good enough'.

This understanding of the concerns associated with bidialectalism and code-switching remain consistent with what Rebecca Moore Howard also noted. Howard argues: "What has gained currency is the pedagogy of *students'* code-switching: AAVE speakers are encouraged to learn the standard and use it in public life while maintaining their native variety for the home and community" (275). In other words, Howard cautions us that the pedagogy of code-switching reinforces the idea that Ebonics is only good to use at home and within the African American community. Gilyard argues that teaching bidialectalism also reinforces the idea that Ebonics is "equal to Standard English but not quite equal enough," and code-switching may reinforce similar concerns (74). Vershawn Young also adds that "what's really wrong with code switching is that it seeks to transform double-consciousness, the very product of racism into a linguistic solution to racial discrimination" ("Nah, We Straight" 56).

This example also points out places where instructors might intervene and help students identify the differences between bidialectalism and code-switching. An instructor might note these differences and how they influence the quality of the arguments made; it seems that in this example, the student conflates the two terms and may not understand the difference. Instructors might also ask students to clearly define eradicationism, bidialectalism and code-switching, since the ability to correctly identify and define terms is a necessary skill that first-year writers must learn to conduct research. To be clear, bidialectalism and code-switching are not necessarily the same, and while these terms should not be conflated, I do believe that the student is correct in interpreting both to suggest a need to adapt Standard English varieties in contexts where audience members may deem Ebonics inappropriate. Bidialectalism implies that proficiency is demonstrated in two different dialects, in this case, Standard

English and Ebonics. Code-switching suggests that speakers can effectively adopt linguistic codes or choices for particular contexts and settings. I talk about bidialectalism and code-switching together in this section because both seem to suggest that proficiency in Standard English is still necessary, and that any variety that differs from Standard English is a deviation from the norm. Bidialectalism (in the context of speaking and writing Ebonics) assumes that students be fluent in both Standard English and Ebonics, and when speaking of code-switching, students must demonstrate that they can switch back-and-forth between Standard English and Ebonics for particular contexts. In short, bidialectalism and/or code-switching may have been early solutions for helping Ebonics speakers learn Standard English; however, making bidialectalism and/or code-switching the main goal of writing instruction may reinforce what eradicationism tends to enforce: that the Ebonics speaker's language is still an inferior variety of English.

As the student's example noted here suggests, using bidialectalism or code-switching as primary pedagogical objectives can potentially hinder Ebonics-speaking students' attitudes toward their home languages, thus compelling some students to always feel the need to code-switch to Standard English, or demonstrate proficiency in Standard English for academic settings. More recently, the concept of code-meshing has gained significant traction in the field, a concept that was not identified by students' previous discussions of bidialectalism and code-switching. Vershawn Young argues that code-meshing is a "better alternative than code switching" because it allows "black students [the opportunity] to mix a black English style with an academic register" (*Average Nigga* 153 n9). Young's discussion of code-meshing is worth emphasizing here because had students (like the one whose work is noted previously) become more familiar with the concept, Young's theory of code-meshing may have helped students better explain how educators can overcome the problems associated with teaching bidialectalism and code-switching, since both terms focus more on separating the differences between

language varieties as opposed to blending them in academic communicative contexts.

Canagarajah further references examples of the ways that writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Geneva Smitherman blend multilanguage varieties in ways that seem more consistent with code-meshing than code-switching. Canagarajah contends:

> Gloria Anzaldúa has also spoken recently about the ways she draws from the postcolonial tradition of mixing Native Indian, Spanish, and English languages (see Lunsford). While such texts exemplify typical processes of intercultural mediation, they are also ideologically powerful. Contact zone literacies resist from the inside without the outsiders understanding their full import; they appropriate the codes of the powerful for the purposes of the subaltern; and they demystify the power, secrecy, and monopoly of the dominant codes. More importantly, they display immense creativity as the subalterns negotiate competing literacies to construct new genres and codes that speak to their own interests. Code meshing in academic writing would be another example in the continuing tradition of contact zone textualities. (601)

To illustrate by example what code-meshing looks like when identified in academic writing, Canagarajah examines critically how Smitherman's blending of Ebonics (what he terms, *AAVE*) and Standard English reflect more than a mere switch from one language variety to the other; instead, for Canagarajah, these stylistic shifts seem more in line with code-meshing because these moves are positioned strategically in a way that politicizes the legitimacy of alternative language varieties to make the case for their legitimacies. In contrast, code-switching is less positioned in a way that makes the case for alternative language varieties because it requires communicators to adopt the code of the dominant discourse, in this case, Standard English. Using the lexical and stylistic devices composed in Smitherman's article,

"CCCC and the Struggle for Student Rights" as an example, Canagarajah argues:

> Smitherman doesn't use quotation marks to flag them as distinct or strange. Using quotation marks would have distanced the author from the language, invoking the traditional biases. Consequently, most readers would now process these switches without pausing to consider them unusual. This ambiguity also results from the fact that some elements of AAVE have become mainstreamed. We are losing the ability to classify certain items as categorically "nonstandard." The deft mixing of codes in this article confronts readers with their own biases–i.e., what do we consider as unsuitable for academic writing, and why? (604)

It is not surprising that students wrote very little about the recent adoptions of code-meshing as pedagogy, since discussions of this phenomenon were very recently published during the time that students completed this assignment. Nonetheless, future work in this area can help students assess the degree to which code-meshing actually solves some of the concerns that students and teachers have with the teaching of bidialectalism and code-switching.

Although some progress has been made with bidialectalism, code-switching, and code-meshing, several students noted that there is much more work to be done with Ebonics. The following example offers a discussion of how students define this progress:

> *The angle taken towards [Ebonics] has changed greatly throughout the years but the progress made is still not enough, although many acknowledge it as a language, they go no further. It is especially underrepresented in academia and Composition Studies. There are many scholars well known for their efforts to bring the US out of the stone-age in regards to AAVE and its use in composition . . .*

Keith Gilyard, one of the many scholars that have written and looked into the status of AAVE in the field, also 'hits' upon the issue discussed in the 1974 Students' Right *document, in his article "African American Contributions to* Composition Studies*". In this paper he talks about many who have contributed to the field but a quote that really sticks out comes from 1988, after a Black English coalition meeting in which they "revealed the influence of self-reflexively constructionist ideas in Composition Studies":*

> Our aim is to develop students with a high degree of practical and theoretical literacy, whose command of language is exemplary. Such a goal rests on the assumptions that the arts of language (reading, writing, speaking and listening) are social and interactive and that meaning is negotiated and constructed. We believe that students should learn to write, read, and reflect on texts from multiple perspectives. (Gilyard 642)

*They both (*Students' Right *and the Black English coalition meeting) aimed high but sadly . . . years later, they have not reached that goal yet.*

Although I believe this student is accurate in her perception that more progress needs to be made (e.g., more pedagogical resources and assignments, more teacher preparation), I also acknowledge that more progress has been made than my students are willing to assert. Between 2003 and 2007, there have been several book-length projects that speak to available resources and pedagogical approaches for supporting Ebonics speaking students (Smitherman and Villanueva; Richardson; Ball and Lardner; Redd and Schuster Webb). Teachers might point students to these additional sources to demonstrate this progress. While I acknowledge that there has been significant work on developing support strategies for teaching Ebonics speakers, I also recognize that many of my students still have a lot of unanswered questions.

According to my students, most of the earlier essays in Composition Studies focus on the legitimacy of Ebonics, why Ebonics should be valued, the need for teachers' self-efficacy stances to transform attitudes toward Ebonics speakers, and the fact that Ebonics pedagogies need to be integrated into the classroom. The problem lies in how to achieve the aforementioned goals. As the following student suggests, the field has focused too much on theories of the legitimacy of Ebonics, and less on how to incorporate Ebonics into the classroom:

> *The field has been to focused on giving AAVE credentials so it can be recognized as a language. It is no question anymore that AAVE is a language within the field. The focus of AAVE now needs to shift to the questions of "What curriculum do you use to teach AAVE in the classroom?" and "How do you teach that curriculum?" The field of Composition Studies has become a record player on repeat, producing the same type of articles over and over again . . .*
>
> *[Elaine] Richardson is providing the field of Composition Studies with a basic blue print of how to incorporate AAVE into a college curriculum. The field needs to take her lead and follow in her footsteps. With the leadership of Richardson and others we have the possibility to make AAVE apart of all curriculums.*
>
> *In all of my research I could only find two articles that provided guidelines for a curriculum. Out of the whole field this is miniscule. My goal is not to disrespect the field but to point out this flaw to get to the result we all would like to see which is for AAVE to be prevalent in all curriculums. With the field as it is now if I were a teacher and I wanted to incorporate AAVE into my curriculum I would not have much to go off of. I would not know how to approach teaching my students and getting them to excel at using this second language. I would have no clue as to which strategies work and which fail. The field has the ability to offer instructors with these resources it is just a matter of actually doing it.*

The student above interprets discussions of AAVE/Ebonics more in terms of the field's explication of its legitimacy and less in regard to its application. It is clear that this student has learned historical background information about Ebonics, but has learned much less about how teachers of writing should incorporate its use into the classroom. I attribute students' perceptions of composition's lack of resources to earlier scholarship (1970 to 1990) and not to the more recent book-length projects.

When students find it difficult to locate additional sources on topics (e.g., the student who could only find two sources on Ebonics and curriculum design), instructors can teach students how to manipulate keyword searches and Boolean tools. It could be that students who have difficulties finding sources are not completely utilizing scholarly search engines effectively, especially given the fact that Ebonics is often termed synonymously with African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black English Vernacular (BEV), Black English (BE), African American English (AAE), African American Language (AAL), and others in our disciplinary scholarship. We might also caution students about the idea of prescription. In the previous example, the student argues that Richardson provides "a blue print" for implementing Ebonics pedagogies into course curricula. It is essential that students understand that specific pedagogical practices and curriculum resources may not readily apply across all rhetorical and institutional contexts. We can also use the "blue print" example to speak of research practices: Just as pedagogical strategies suggest, research study designs do not easily replicate across different populations and contexts.

To be clear, some prescription is necessary pedagogically in composition classrooms, especially when teaching academic conventions that govern what is suitable for composing in certain genres. For example, when composing a research paper, such as the one described in this article, it is necessary to require students to correctly cite sources to support their arguments because students should be able to locate, critically evaluate, and cite scholarly sources in a composition classroom. In this case,

prescribed pedagogical requirements are necessary. Latitude and flexibility can be granted, however, in the way that students choose to present and organize their arguments and findings, as long as students are making rhetorical and audience-driven choices about the ways that they choose to present their research. In this latter case, prescribing a template and argument for the research assignment is less necessary, as long as choices are effective in supporting the overall purposes of their arguments, and as long as choices are appropriate for their audiences. The point I aim to emphasize here, rather, is that prescription of pedagogies that come from different institutional contexts are a bit more complicated.

Some students attributed the lack of progress in Composition Studies to its failure in changing the general public's attitudes about Ebonics. As one student writes:

> *Throughout the long charted path of AAVE and its acceptance in Composition Studies and English classrooms alike, the scholars of the field have failed to fully tackle the task of integrating AAVE in college classrooms. The problem lies in the approach the scholars of the field are taking, and have been since the early 70s. AAVE's state in the field of Composition Studies has not evolved and should be partly attributed to the scholars who speak of it. Articles written by highly acclaimed scholars in prestigious journals such as,* CCC *and,* English Journal *are usually read and discussed by other scholars in the field causing a compiled source of analogous views and positions. Scholars are preaching to the wrong audience, and have been for decades.*

Whoa! What an indictment on compositionists' and linguists' work! Some scholars have in fact acknowledged the gap between scholars and the general public (Zuidema; Smitherman *Talkin that Talk*); however, as my students indicate, less stuff *been done* to address the broader public's knowledge about language. What students are advocating here is a form of activist rhetoric: For these students, writing teachers must go beyond the four walls of

their classrooms and the pages of academic journals to inform the public about language rights and Ebonics. Though activist rhetoric has been addressed in Composition Studies (Marback; Adler-Kassner), the previous student's comments indicate that composition scholars can do more work in educating the public about linguistic diversity. Perhaps, instructors might ask students who draw similar conclusions to the one identified above to offer examples of the ways that both other students and scholars can educate the public on linguistic diversity. What happens when people don't want to listen? How might a student or professor organize forums to educate the public and get citizens to come? How do we align our scholarship with the reality that people will still be judged based on the way they speak? Addressing these concerns can encourage students to examine their own advocacy responsibilities, as opposed to shifting the responsibility to others, even though I do share some of their concerns that scholars might do more.

While some students place responsibility on composition teachers to convince the general public of the legitimacy of Ebonics, students like the one whose excerpt appears below, attribute the lack of progress to inherent racial injustices both within society and within Composition Studies:

> *Every February we are reminded of a significant time in American History: The Civil Rights Movement. Courageous African Americans surfaced throughout the U.S. during this era with heroic displays of bravery and perseverance, which eventually paid off in 1968 when the movement ended with African Americans gaining equality. This equality was not achieved without the cost of the lives of many prominent leaders of the African American community. One life in particular that was taken during the Civil Rights Movement is still a very recognizable voice and face today. He immortalized himself as an icon in history throughout the world by leading the Civil Rights Movement in America, and by displaying infinite patience and bravery as he fought the very tough battle of achieving equality. Martin Luther King Jr. is forever*

remembered for his speeches and actions throughout the Civil Rights Movement; one of these actions was the Birmingham campaign, which eventually landed King in jail. While in jail he wrote a famous letter titled, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which was a description of the racial inequality in America at the time; in the letter King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." This quote still holds to be true today relating to African Americans, because although they eventually gained "equality" in American society, that's just what it was: "equality." The African American dialect, better known as AAVE, is not respected or taken into account today in education. This issue has been, and still is addressed in the field of Composition Studies. Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the most remembered individuals in American history, however; he did not receive good grades for his composition when he was attending school, which is ironic considering the fact that King was a remarkable speaker, and is remembered for many speeches that he gave during the Civil Rights Movement. This example from history clearly shows that AAVE is not fairly represented in education as a standard or non-standard dialect, but a poor broken version of Standard English. Many writers in the field of Composition Studies have written numerous articles on the injustice in the American educational system. These writers fairly represent, and effectively discuss the role of AAVE in Composition Studies, but unfortunately that role is one that is disrespected and disregarded.

It is quite interesting how this student's text frames historical events through the lens of interpretive analysis as opposed to restating historical facts. From these moves, we see a glimpse of a student attempting to do interpretive work as opposed to summary/explication. The previous excerpt uses the Civil Rights Movement as a lens for discussing how historical frameworks can be applied to Composition Studies and language rights. Both Smitherman's "CCCC's Role in the Struggle for Student Rights" (1999) and Parks's *Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language* (2000) also provide historical lens in their

discussions of language (particularly, Ebonics speaking students), and this student effectively does the same by demonstrating the relationship between historical racism in the U.S., and that within Composition Studies. Using the student's previous example of disciplinary and racial injustice, instructors might also ask students to provide more explicit examples of how racism and linguistic prejudice continue to play out in both disciplinary and societal contexts. Instructors might ask: How do we know rhetoric and composition scholars continue to enact racial injustices toward linguistic practices? What evidence from our disciplinary and classroom spaces may point to this? While students accuse society and Composition Studies of linguistic racism, their arguments are less persuasive without more concrete evidence. In short, understanding the value of evidence is an essential practice for teaching both argument and research.

Study Limitations

Some instructors might claim that students are merely reporting information based on what they have read (as typical of many first-year writing courses). I would argue, however, that students are doing essential work that researchers must do, especially for literature reviews, even when their arguments are less persuasive. In "From Critical Research Practice to Critical Research Reporting," Canagarajah argues that composition instructors must "realize that writing/reporting research findings is no insignificant appendage to the research process. It is the written document that embodies, reflects, and often constitutes the whole research activity for the scholarly community" (322). Although students are responding to texts they've read, they are also *attempting* to find gaps and inconsistencies in these conversations.

I also understand that students' interpretations about the field's conversations may not necessarily be accurate. While I pointed out these inaccuracies and inconsistencies to students (and have pointed out a few in this scholarly space), I am conflicted as to whether or not this essay is the space to exhaustively evaluate

these students' responses. Where necessary, I did note examples or places where instructors might recommend ways to help students revise their arguments and research practices, since I argue that we can use our disciplinary scholarship to teach research and argument to first-year students. Moreover, much scholarship on students' use of Ebonics focuses on summative and formative assessment of students' essays or essay exams (Canagarajah "Safe Houses"; Richardson; Gilyard and Richardson; Fogel and Ehri). I want to move students' discourse away from grading and criticism in our disciplinary scholarship toward hearing what they do have to say. Despite students' inconsistencies, there is still value for composition instructors in learning what students do know about Ebonics and our disciplinary scholarship. I was especially surprised with the way my students were able to trace theories of eradicationism and bidialectalism without my explicitly teaching students this progress in the field. Although their discussions offer more summary of both theories than critique, I still learned a great deal about how they understood these discussions.

Concluding Remarks and Implications

I have argued that using Ebonics and the field as subject matter can teach students how to revise research and arguments. To summarize, we can use Ebonics and the field to point out shortcomings in students' research processes and products, including how they search for sources (i.e. keywords), what they search for (books, journals, etc.), and where sufficient gaps occur in their research. Students' written work points out not only their knowledge of the field but also their limited exposure to, and knowledge of, disciplinary conversations. This limited exposure and knowledge often appears in places where students argue disciplinary conversations about Ebonics as missing that are actually quite commonplace. Each of these concerns is critical to college writers' and potential research scholars' research processes.

This essay also argues that despite students' limited exposure to and knowledge about the field, as teachers and scholars, we can still learn a great deal. We learn tremendously about their lack of exposure to, and confidence in CCCC "Students' Right to Their Own Language", a resolution in which many of us take pride. Despite our position statements, students still feel that writing teachers will frown upon alternative language varieties. And while the recommendations offered by students are quite short of innovation, we should heed their call to offer more alternative cultural courses for non-black students who are still not familiar with Ebonics. Furthermore, although some teachers and scholars may argue that they really didn't learn anything new from students' interpretations of the field, that claim still raises the question as to why first-year writing students have limited exposure to the field from jump. Whose fault is that? Despite some concerns with the quality of my students' arguments, let's remember that like writing, research takes practice, so we should applaud their work with the field the first time around. What we can learn from their analyses is that once students have investigated the discipline of Composition Studies, they quite quickly catch on to the contradictory messages–like bidialectalism–some teachers and scholars may send. Thus, students can practice becoming knowledge makers in a discipline that doesn't always consider their contributions. At times their criticisms are harsh, but if you cain't take the heat, get out the kitchen!

Notes

[1]I rely on the term Ebonics as opposed to African American Vernacular English or Black English because I subscribe to the Afrocologist theory that posits Ebonics as a language in its own right, and not a nonstandard variety of English. I do acknowledge more recent terms including African American Language that similarly define Ebonics as a language in its own right. For the purposes of this article, however, I use the term Ebonics consistently throughout.

[2]On December 26, 1996, Geneva Smitherman and other educators were featured on CNN's *Talk Back Live*, where they defended the Oakland School Board's resolution to teach students how to bridge from Ebonics to learning Standard English. Because the setting resembled a town hall meeting, the segment was treated like a discussion forum, and those in the audience were given more air time than linguistic and education experts, and in turn, denounced Ebonics.

[3]Students began with the 1970's because 1974 marks the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" Resolution voted on at the 1974 CCCC Convention; the 1970's seemed to be an appropriate place to begin since it marks a period when several major debates on language (including the Ann Arbor "Black English Case") become prevalent.

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APPENDIX

The Assignment

In the last unit, we focused more on the linguistic features of AAVE/AAL/Ebonics; in this unit, we will focus more on the scholars who discuss AAVE/AAL/Ebonics features and student writing in Composition Studies. For this assignment, we'll learn more about AAL/AAVE/Ebonics, and how it affects language and educational policy, college writing, and the teaching of writing. For this, we'll read various articles within

the field of Composition Studies as an introduction to the discipline of teaching writing and students who speak/write AAL/AAVE/Ebonics.

Task

For this essay, you'll be asked to develop an argument as to whether Composition Studies effectively discusses the usage of AAL/AAVE/Ebonics as a language/language variety, and whether or not discussion on the topic has changed or evolved over time. To do this, you will also consider referring to specific journals (*CCC*, *College English*, *Teaching English in a Two-Year College*, *Journal of Basic Writing*, *JAC* or others) to gain a sense of what is occurring more recently in the field. You can gain access to these journals by going to *www.lib.msu.edu*, where you can search JSTOR or the Literature Online (LION) database. Your analysis should include the following:

An Argument/Thesis on how Composition Studies discusses issues of AAVE/AAL/Ebonics; a discussion of how AAVE/AAL/Ebonics has been discussed historically (1970–2000) through course readings; and a discussion of how AAVE/AAL/Ebonics is more recently discussed in Composition Studies (2000-present) in related journals within the field.

To accomplish these requirements, you'll first want to refer to the course readings to make an argument or claim as to whether Composition Studies fairly and effectively addresses issues of AAVE/AAL/Ebonics. For this, you'll want to draw on evidence of at least two course readings to make your claim. In your discussion and analysis of course readings, you might consider providing summaries of each reading and authors' stance, referring to specific examples from the readings to support the authors' main idea(s), and then shifting toward formulating your own argument that analyzes each authors' effectiveness in discussing AAVE/AAL/Ebonics within the field.

Next, you'll need to research more recent scholarship within Composition Studies, by consulting journals such as *College Composition and Communication* (CCC), *College English*, *Journal of Advanced Composition* (JAC), or *Teaching English in a Two-Year College* (TETYC). Access to these journals can be granted on campus through *www.lib.X.edu*, JSTOR.com, Literature Online (LION), and additional MSU library electronic indexes (we'll work together as a class in learning how to navigate online indexes). Once you've searched and browsed articles within any of these journals regarding AAVE/AAL, you'll then select AT LEAST two to explain how they also support your overall argument/claim on the representation of AAVE. An annotated bibliography and Works Cited page will also accompany your work, and be included in the submission packet (more details later).

In short, you should carefully analyze a total of AT LEAST four sources (two reflecting course readings assigned in class and two reflecting scholarship demonstrated in recent journals from the online databases). In your discussion of each article, you should make an argument/thesis that demonstrates whether or not Composition Studies as a discipline effectively discusses scholarship concerning AAVE/AAL and whether or not such discussion has changed/evolved over time.

Possible Assigned Readings to Use with This Assignment:

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