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Formal English without tears: Rewriting the narrative of the "low-level" learner*

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* Dedicated to Professor Jack Whitehead, Dr Annie Gray and Pamela Smith, without whom this paper and this educator, (at least in this "incarnation"), would not exist. With love and gratitude for their generosity, instruction and wisdom.

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Abstract

This is an account of a paradigm shift in perspective, emerging from a Living Theory approach to action research, and the way in which this shifted perspective revealed both a longstanding and systemic educational injustice and a high academic failure rate directly tied to that injustice. It also describes the development of an approach to the teaching of Academic English that is just, empowering and effective for students. I argue here that a transformation in personal perspective, especially the recognition of a living contradiction, (as articulated by Jack Whitehead), was the key to understanding and addressing what has long appeared to be an academic and pedagogical issue but which, in fact, was one of social justice and cultural diversity.

Keywords: developmental education; remedial education; community college English; teaching English; social justice; English as a second language; language and intelligence; language and prejudice; educational colonization; cultural prejudice; institutional narratives; objectivism; community college; college success and failure; student profiles; new language paradigms.

Introduction

This paper is a hybrid. It describes both the evolution of a personal, Living Educational Theory, (LET), and the specific, generalizable findings of an Action Research project. I hope to demonstrate the crucial role of a Living Theory approach in the generation of original, useful educational research. I suggest that LET offers more than a means of empowering individuals to become authentic, effective educators; that it offers more, even, than a means by which embodied knowledge can move from the tacit to the explicit and finally, via the sharing and public scrutiny of individual accounts, to the realm of collective knowledge. I suggest that it provides an important mechanism for resolving systemic and seemingly intractable, educational problems that do not lend themselves to resolution through conventional, propositional channels.

It does this by asking the practitioner, recursively, to identify and challenge not only his or her own practice, but everything that informs that practice - personal, institutional and cultural values and assumptions[1]. It does this through the demand that practitioners scrutinize the ubiquitous contradictions between professed values and actual practice, between our images of ourselves as educators and how we actually occur for others, (how they perceive us and how we impact them), and between our collective or institutional images of the education we are delivering and what we are actually doing. (Such practices are bound to reveal embedded and unchallenged, personal and institutional assumptions and inconsistencies, the kinds of revelations that are the precursors to insight and change.) Finally, LET turns the traditional approach to education as a social science on its head. In the latter, the individual researcher narrows his/her practice, measuring it against external, pre-existing models or "authorized knowledge" (McNiffa, 2007). LET, on the other hand, expands outwards, validating and authorizing individual, personal and embodied knowledge. This, in turn, frees the individual to question authorized knowledge and even to contradict pre-existing models through subjective, empirical experience. Thus LET involves a process of "stepping out of the box" - the prerequisite of all problem solving, of any new discovery.

An important distinction here is that I do not intend to suggest that the goal either of action research or of a Living Theory approach is, or ought to be, that of obtaining specific objectives or meeting specific targets. In fact, I would argue strenuously that, primarily, as Jean McNiff writes:

> It is about problematizing practice so that practice does not become the implementation of rules to fit action into a predetermined model. It is about asking interesting questions about whether we are exercising our influence in a way that we hope is educational, for the good (McNiff, 2007, p. 312).

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[1] Action research begins with values. As a self reflective practitioner you need to be aware of what drives your life and work, so you can be clear about what you are doing and why you are doing it... The methodology of action research means that you have to evaluate what you are doing. You need to check constantly that what you are doing really is working. Are you really influencing your situation or are you fooling yourself? This awareness of the need for self-evaluation shows your willingness to accept responsibility for your own thinking and action... Action research helps you to formalise your learning and give a clear and justified account of your work, not on a one-off basis, but as a continuing regular feature of your practice. (McNiff, 2002)

However, I also suggest that the natural offspring of a Living Theory approach to action research are new, specific and measureable solutions, discoveries and insights. I consider that these might be seen in much in the same way that the Christian canon represents "works" as the fruit of the essential quality of faith: that is, as indicators of an effective practice, but not the only indicators nor the measure of its value.

Background to the Inquiry

In 2009, I began work as a writing instructor in the Transitional Studies Department (TSD) at Pellissippi State Community College in East Tennessee. This is a new department, where strategies that emphasize student engagement and raise process above outcome are actively encouraged and adopted. Its primary task is helping under-prepared students to develop the required skills for first year college courses. As in departments and community colleges across the nation, rising student enrollment and increasing state demands for higher, faster outcomes with decreased budgets, mean that this task actually requires a Houdini-like maneuver – that of achieving within a single fifteen-week semester what six years of high school have failed to achieve. The "fall-back position," of having students repeat the same courses until mastery is achieved, is self-defeating. Each time a student fails to complete a pre-college course, he or she becomes significantly less likely ever to graduate college at all (Table1, see below.)

Of the 2,000 or so freshmen entering Pellissippi each year, more than half will begin their college careers in the TSD. This figure is reflected nationally and shows no likelihood of dropping in the near future:

> ...fewer than half of the students who enter college directly from high school complete even a minimally defined college preparatory program. Once in college, 53 percent of all students must take remedial courses. Those students requiring the most remedial work are the least likely to persist and graduate (Tritelli, 2003, p.1).

In 2010 the educational partnership "Getting Past Go" reported:

> National data from the U.S. Department of Education on participation in remedial education found that 34% of all new entering college students required at least one remedial education class. Of those students who enrolled in a community college, 43% required some remedial education.1 While these numbers are alarming, more recent research on participation rates at the state level paint an even bleaker picture. Recent state analyses conducted by ECS reveal that many states have remediation participation rates between 30% and 40%, with some states having rates over 50%. ("Getting Past Go", 2010, p. 4)

This is an apparently intractable, macro-scale problem, one that has drawn and continues to draw many millions of dollars and human hours in research and educational program development. It is patently not the kind, or the order of issue that is relevant or susceptible to the micro gains made by individual action researchers seeking to improve their educational practice and to share their insights with fellow practitioners. Except that, in a manner similar to that demonstrated by Shumacher (1989), it is.

Table 1. Persistence rate for DSP students by number of required developmental courses (Pellissippi State Community College, 2005, p. 22)

No. of DSP Courses Taken	Fall 2000	Spring 2003	Persistence Rate	Attrition Rate
1 - 2 DSP	309	141	**45.6%**	54.4%
3 - 4 DSP	228	72	**31.6%**	68.4%
5 - 6 DSP	82	23	**28.0%**	72.0%
7 - 8 DSP	37	5	**13.5%**	86.5%
No. of DSP Courses Taken	**Fall 2001**	**Spring 2004**	**Persistence Rate**	**Attrition Rate**
No DSP	308	191	**62.0%**	38.0%
At least 1 DSP (Average Perstnce/Attr.)	578	218	**37.7%**	62.3%
1 - 2 DSP	197	113	**57.4%**	42.6%
3 - 4 DSP	221	131	**33.9%**	60.1%
5 - 6 DSP	131	25	**19.1%**	80.9%
7 - 8 DSP	29	5	**17.2%**	82.8%
No. of DSP Courses Taken	**Fall 2002**	**Spring 2005**	**Persistence Rate**	**Attrition Rate**
No DSP	301	198	**65.8%**	34.2%
At least 1 DSP (Average Perstnce/Attr.)	661	244	**35.9%**	63.1%
1 - 2 DSP	215	116	**53.9%**	46.1%
3 - 4 DSP	224	72	**32.1%**	67.9%
5 - 6 DSP	167	43	**25.7%**	74.3%
7 - 8 DSP	55	13	**23.6%**	76.4%

Part One: The Generative Role of Living Theory - From Awareness to Diagnosis

At the start of my first semester as an instructor, I signed up to participate in an action research program whose goal was to encourage faculty to implement their own action research – a skill that seemed potentially useful in helping me to become an effective educator. Over the first half of the semester, I was tasked to find and develop an inquiry that was of interest and relevance to me as a basis for an action research project. The subject of my inquiry found me.

In my first week of college teaching, I found myself on an East Knoxville campus, facing a classroom of twenty-four disengaged and, in some cases, actively hostile, young adults. Almost all came from “blue collar” families. (My own is professional and middle class.) About one third were African American or mixed race. (I am white and European.) Most were the first members of their families ever to enter college. (Most of my family has attended college or university.) And the worlds my students trailed with them into the classroom were alien, painful and, occasionally, shocking.

One student could not sleep at night because of the sounds of gunfire in her neighborhood. Even when it was quiet, she lay awake listening and afraid. Another, a joy to have in the class, was picked up by police and sent back to a prison he had sworn never to return to. His friends insisted he was innocent. One young mother came to class with bruises

because her boyfriend regularly beat her as a way of dissuading her from attending college. (He disapproved of her ambition to obtain a degree.) Yet another became homeless at about the mid semester mark. For two weeks, she and her husband lived in their car. She still came to classes, although getting her assignments done proved rather trickier.

Standing at the front of that classroom, white, middle class, middle aged and, from my students' point of view, profoundly out of touch with their reality, I was almost as alien as if I had come from another planet. They knew it; I knew it and they showed how they felt about it. Phone texting and messaging on social networks during class, shrugging or joking when asked a question, sauntering into class late with as much noise and aplomb as could be managed and other, similar behaviors were regular occurrences. The next few weeks were not just uncomfortable; they were overwhelming. Whatever theories of language I had absorbed, whatever social and personal values had informed my approach to my role as an educator, all of it – all of me - was being confronted by a sickening dissonance in my own classroom, the gap between the person and the educator I wished to be and wished to be perceived as, and the perception, the reflection in their eyes, that my students were giving back to me.

More than one colleague told me that their behaviors were just part of the profile for these students: childish, undisciplined, lazy and disengaged - a "carry-over" from high school. I, however, did not perceive a "profile." Instead, I perceived these behaviors as hostile and passive/aggressive. Although my interpretation was at odds with that of several, much more experienced colleagues, reason and instinct told me that I knew hostility and resentment when I met them. I also knew, rationally at least, that however personal that hostility appeared to be, it was very unlikely to actually be personal.

When I stopped taking it personally, I began to experience the passive/aggressive behavior of my students differently. It occurred to me as a way of hitting back at something I represented, something deeply resented. Given my power to affect their lives for good or ill, however, they simply could not afford the luxury of being overtly hostile. The question was what, exactly, did they resent so bitterly? If it were race, class and age there was nothing I could do about it except give them time to get to know me... and cross my fingers. If it were something else, and if I could discover what that was, then I had a chance of becoming a much more effective educator. This question became the germ of my first action research inquiry.

I was aware of my students' generally unhappy dispositions towards formal English, somewhere between merely uneasy and outright antagonistic, and of their low self-efficacy with regard to writing. I now set myself the task of discovering the roots of their antagonism and committed myself to exploring its context - the history and scope of their educational experiences. I also considered that, to some degree, we might, institutionally and nationally, be teaching to a narrative – a collection of stories *about* our students rather than our actual students. (We can call a collection of such narratives a "profile." Once a profile is accepted, we tend to see only evidence that reinforces it.) This would mean that, rather than being open to unexpected and extraordinary potentials, we would have predetermined expectations of our students, expectations that could become self-fulfilling prophecies. In retrospect, it was my good fortune that my first semester's teaching had offered me only

two options: discover another narrative or get used to watching angry, disaffected students failing my course in large numbers.

I began my inquiry by seeing, as far as possible, how things might look from my students' points of view. I saw decade-long, (or longer), struggles with a language both alien and, supposedly, "superior" to their own, natural idiolects. I was predisposed - perhaps enabled - to see this because of my own background. In Scotland, my native country, the near demise of Gaelic was greatly assisted by educational policies excluding the use of the language in schools, (from the 16th century on); by the ill-informed snobbery that viewed Gaelic speakers as rustic primitives and by the concomitant shame of Gaelic speakers like my own great-grandparents who refused to allow my grandmother to learn or to speak their own, first language. Today, in the area where I was born, there is the same class/language divide between the speakers of the Scots vernacular, (Lallans or Lowland Scots), and speakers of "proper" English as that which once divided the Lowland Scots and the Gaels. (So I know a little bit about language and cultural identity. In fact, I inherent in my family and cultural history, consider this as part of my own, "tacit" or "embodied" knowledge[2]). From this standpoint - and to my horror - I could truthfully characterize my job as being to teach my "inferior" students an alien and "superior" language. I now thought I recognized a very similar hostility in myself to the one I saw in so many of them. It is a hostility, (largely unconscious), born of oppression, (unrecognized), by a compulsory education program which devalues, punitively, all but the idiolect closest to that of the most powerful, privileged classes.

I am immovably convinced that human beings are not divided into superior and inferior races, cultures, classes or sexes. I am equally convinced that, whether we are aware of it or not, it is natural and instinctive - even right in us, to resent and resist any system or program that requires us to believe that who we are and where we come from makes us less than, or worse than someone who has more power or privilege than we do. From this perspective, the disaffection of my students not only appeared to be natural, but actually healthy. Roughly eight months later, I would hear Jack Whitehead speak at the 2010 Action Research Conference in San Diego. He gave a precise and appropriate definition of what these students had undergone and what, I believe, most students in the Western world undergo. He called it, "educational colonization", something that reinforces the superiority of a social elite and the inferiority of those who are to be "educated." This is what I had unconsciously recognized in the way that my students saw me and what I represented. Thus, three or four weeks after the start of the semester, I walked into my classroom and, in the broad Scots of my home town, said something like:

> Richt yuse tatty bogles; hawd yir wheesht, pin yer lugs back and gie's yir foo, foo mind, attenshun. I'm no goany waste ma brathe, ye ken. This is whit yill hear whaur a cum frae... An er's nuhin' wrang wi' it. (Personal communication)

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[2] ...a vast reservoir of personal knowledge underlies our personal-social practices. We know more than we can say; our personal knowledge is unarticulatable because usually, we are not aware of it; we just know. ...Tacit knowledge is that vast fund of practical, local and traditional knowledge that is embodied in dispositions and forms of life and expressed in flair and intuition and of which our theoretical or articulated knowledge is only the visible tip (Gray 1993:70) On this view, knowledge is in the way we live our lives and is, essentially, embodied knowledge. (McNiff and Whitehead, 2000, p.41)

The effect was instant and electric; it was as though I had morphed into an extraterrestrial in front of the class. I was no longer whoever or whatever they imagined, but something new and unexpected – and I had their attention. I translated:

> Right you potato scarecrows, be quiet; pin back your ears and give me your full, full remember, attention. I'm not going to waste my breath you know. This is what you will hear where I come from... and there's nothing wrong with it. (Personal communication)

I then gave a command performance of a long list of phrases they wanted to hear in broad Scots... Afterwards, I explained that Scots is considered closer to the oldest form of English, Anglo Saxon, than modern English and that some of the supposedly "worst" of Appalachian speech "errors" are simply archaic forms of English. In this way I led up to my "bombshells" - that there is nothing wrong with the way we speak in our own communities, and that the English we use in college is nothing more than an agreement, a common tongue that allows a Scot, for example, and a Tennessean to understand one another.

In that moment, I was standing and breathing inside a truth that I had previously known only intellectually; language is a living, cultural thing and formal English, the "lingua franca" of the academic and modern world, exists nowhere as a language in its own right. It is simply a convention, an agreed medium of communication by which peoples of the English speaking world may understand one another. It exists as an ideal to which speakers and writers aspire, just as spoken and written Latin did in the Middle Ages, frequently visible in written form, rarely spoken and never occurring as a natural and original idiolect. The "penny" suddenly dropped. Since no one really speaks it, it is essentially a second language – or at least a second sub-set of the language - for most of the English-speaking world, for this writer and for you, the reader. It is taught quite differently, however. Rather than tasking children with acquiring a second and separate language, (or sub-set), we present them with the invidious, impossible job of developing a "better" version of their own, natural dialect.

Two serious falsehoods underpin this approach: first, that one language set, (academic, formal, standard or "proper" English), is just an improved version of the other, (the natural dialect); second, that the "better" version may be acquired simply by polishing the inferior dialect. In fact, the forms and conventions, the musical cadences and arrangements of formal English and those belonging to other dialects are each distinct, each internally consistent. And each expresses the speaker's reality in a uniquely creative way:

> Bowerman concludes that children work out the meaning system through active experience with language in social interactions... In other words, often repeated verbal formulae that adults and older children use in interactions with young children provide the "frames" these children use in these encounters and hence the means for discovering and constructing new meanings… Bowerman's "frame" model suggests that imitation plays an important role by providing unanalyzed "amalgams" that constitute frames in which the young child can discover the semantic distinctions in his native tongue. (Taylor-Parker, 1985, p. 620)

Any method that attempts to resolve one idiolect into another is, therefore, inherently and fatally flawed - and a terrible teaching method. However, we attempt exactly this. We try to "improve" the idiolect of children *into* formal English - which is presented as though it were the only acceptable version of every idiolect of the English-speaking world. The greater the divergence of any vernacular from the patterns and rules of the proper

"norm," the greater is the degree of the perceived "debasement" of that vernacular. In other words, we teach it "normatively."

There is an obvious and serious implication here; if my idiolect, my natural mode of self-expression is part of my identity, then to the extent that my speech patterns are unacceptable or inferior - so am I. And if the linguistic conventions of my own family and community, that help bind me to them and reinforce my own identity, if these are "inferior," then so is the world to which I belong. Students whose own dialects differ widely from formal English have thus undergone a kind of educational oppression. They have been confronted from childhood by a language they have rarely heard and whose patterns of syntax and grammar are as alien as they are difficult. So different are the language patterns in which they habitually communicate and which truly belong to them from "proper" English, (which belongs to someone else), that they have no personal stake in it. Worse yet, this is a language that, by virtue of its proposed "superiority," testifies to their socio-linguistic "inferiority." It is, in a real sense, the language of colonization, something to be resisted and resented.

I had discovered what Jack Whitehead calls "a living contradiction"[3] between my values and my practice: I was administering a program of instruction based on colonizing values and assumptions, and which invited failure, (or selected out), those whom it devalued. Given my own feelings about the colonizing of Scottish language and traditions, this was a dreadful discovery. And I would have been determined to find a more human and humanizing approach with which to replace it even if it were not, demonstrably, failing educationally.

I am aware that some English language teachers may be offended by this interpretation. Nonetheless, the fact that such colonization bears no relation to our own conscious personal values, intentions or desires does not change the character of our program. You might ask yourself: Is this is a fair representation of the teaching of formal English? Specifically, do we teach it as though it were a better form of any and every dialect? Is that approach based on truth? Is it just? Whose dialect does formal English most closely resemble? (Are there class based values inherent in teaching it normatively?) Will the majority thrive on this approach? (Do they now?) An honest response surely tells us that our traditional approach is inherently colonizing, and that it puts us in the position of actively alienating students from the language we want them to learn. At the very least, this is self-defeating as a teaching paradigm - something the literature on language acquisition and second language teaching might have told us long ago:

> Second language attitude refers to acquirers' orientations toward speakers of the target language, as well as personality factors. The second hypothesis is that such factors relate directly to acquisition and only indirectly to conscious learning. Briefly, the "right" attitudinal factors produce two effects: they encourage useful input for language acquisition and they allow the acquirer to be "open" to this input so it can be utilized for acquisition.

[3] I am thinking here of "I" existing as a contradiction in the sense of holding together a commitment to live certain values with the recognition of the denial of these values in practice (Whitehead, 2009 p. 85).

> The pedagogical implications of these hypotheses will not surprise many experienced teachers: if the direct relationship between acquisition and attitudinal factors does exist, and if our major goal in language teaching is the development of communicative abilities, we must conclude that attitudinal factors and motivational factors are more important than aptitude. This is because conscious learning makes only a small contribution to communicative ability. (Krashen, 1981, p. 5)

I had found a simple, straightforward and compelling rationale, not only for the passive aggression I was seeing but also for the lack of fluency, the self-doubt and the sense of disconnection, (the "disconnect"), which characterize so many developmental students of formal English. The same rationale also explains why so many can discover no motivating interest in the discipline of writing beyond "passing the course." This is important because a student's relationship with the language of academia will play a significant role in the final success or failure of his or her personal ambitions (This success or failure is often, more impersonally, defined as the "student retention rate").

A constant battle to follow instructions and prompts - to participate in academic life, will present a relentless source of stress. More than that, it will be isolating. The individual who does not speak the tongue of the country in which he or she resides, remains an outsider, a stranger in a strange land. Two consequences are inescapable. One is obvious: the kind of academic failure associated with a general lack of proficiency in academic English. The second will be more or less invisible. It is a "drop out" rate reflective of prolonged struggle and prolonged failure to progress in any field of study where competency in the common language is essential.

Clearly, then, not only in developmental programs, but also in labs and classrooms across campuses, the impact of the aforementioned "disconnect" is being felt, reflected in student retention, in success and "failure" rates, and in the success of a college as a whole. Suppose that there were a simple mechanism for successfully repairing the "disconnect" from formal English, and enabling a rapid mastery of the language. The repercussions would reach far beyond any individual English or writing course. If it exists, however, given the pressure to find any kind of magic bullet with which to propel students to academic success, why has it not been discovered and applied by now? This brings me back to the narrative of the "low level learner," an East Knoxville class room and a Living Educational Theory approach to action research.

The narrative of the "at risk," the low-level or the developmental learner, postulates a deficit in the student or a value judgment about the learning level of that student. For example, learning-support students in my college who register online, will see a chart identifying their "deficits", as it lists the courses they need to take. When we teach a child to count, clap, ride a bike or swim, do we ever represent ourselves as correcting that child's "deficit"? Of course not, instead we view the task as one of helping the child to master something he or she has not yet learned. We place no value judgment on the current level of the child's learning. Remediating a skill "deficit" makes a clear statement that something is lacking that ought to be there, is wrong and needs to be fixed. My job as an educator then becomes that of remediating the deficit. Consider that the traditional teaching of formal English - by "polishing" and correcting the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of the student's dialect into the required "standard" - is, in and of itself, a kind of remediation. Despite that

remediation, the learning support student has not acquired the skills he or she "ought" to have acquired before arrival in college. Thus the prevailing narrative and the hidden assumptions in the traditional teaching of academic English as normative, feed into one another to create a closed and value-laden system, each reinforcing the story told by the other.

These stories are further reinforced, I believe, by a long-standing, pervasive and erroneous association between language performance and intelligence. This is the likely result of classroom IQ tests delivered in a standard American English that many children do not use, (English speaking and non-English speaking). Indeed there have been famous instances of children labeled as retarded because of this bias against linguistic difference.[4]

> While hundred of thousands of standardized tests are administered each year, the number of locally developed instruments is in the millions. A large number of such instruments are developed by persons with little or no training in test development; a frightening fact (given) that all those tests contribute to decisions which affect the immediate and long-range future of many individuals.
>
> ...Many of the educational and intelligence tests used to assess ethnic and linguistic minority children use norms for children primarily from white, middle-class backgrounds. Thus, such tests are often biased against the minority student. Most intelligence tests rely heavily on language, yet there may be little attempt to determine a child's level of proficiency in the language or dialect in which a test is administered. For example, a Hispanic child may be able to perform a task that is called for in an intelligence test, but not be able to understand the directions given in English. Even if a Spanish translation were available, it might not be in a dialect with which the child is familiar… and might yield test results that are not a true indication of a child's abilities. The same may be true from Asians, African Americans or Native Americans… The refusal to acknowledge the importance or the value of linguistic difference has resulted in inadequate services and in the inappropriate placement of children through highly questionable assessment procedures. (Silva, 1997, p. 225)

As long as we do not question the validity of our testing methods, the statistical evidence is quite clear; low-level language skills and low-level intelligence are directly interrelated and the narrative ("what everybody knows"), about our students is amply supported by a huge body of statistics. When we question the validity of the tests, however, the picture of the low-level learner is replaced by one of massive social injustice. In my subjective, microcosmic world, my own experience proves the point.

An informal survey that I conduct at the start of the semester always yields a multitude of variations on the same theme. Most of my students have been told, at some time or another, that they should not expect too much out of a career, should not think about attending college or, in a few cases, will never amount to anything in life. Well Intentioned advice, possibly, for the low-level, "not too bright" or "non-academic" student whose brain is just not up to the demands of college. Disastrous for the oppression-

[4] Diana vs. State Board of Education, CA 70 RFT (N.D. Cal. 1970) Plaintiffs in Diana v. State Board of Education (1970), filed on behalf of Mexican American children in Monterey County, California, alleged that the school system was inaccurately identifying Spanish-speaking children as mentally retarded on the basis of IQ tests administered in English. The court ruled that non-English proficient children cannot be placed in Special Education on the basis of culturally biased tests or tests administered in English (Learning Disabilities Learning Assessment: Legal and Ethical Provisions).

damaged, intelligent and wonderful individual who has been condemned by an institutional story to live inside a voiceless, powerless prison wherein learning itself is beyond his reach. In reality, such advice is invariably disastrous since the former "low level" student is an invention and product of inaccurate and class-based assumptions.

Our narrative is still further supported by the evidence that some children do prove highly successful in developing fluency in formal English through traditional teaching methods, while others seem destined to remain at a remedial level, whatever steps are taken to bridge the gap. The flaw in that evidence, however, lies in a set of assumptions: that the traditional method of teaching formal English is substantially effective in and of itself; that it must produce the same results in all children of equal intelligence; and that the variable is, therefore, the ability and potential of the individual child.

If x is a, then y is b, says the equation. The same set of premises will always yield the same results. If a solution requires a different set of premises, then we will never find that solution while the original premises remain unchallenged. If we begin from the premise that, because they do not learn through methods that (we assume) work for the majority, students who struggle with formal English face special, (i.e. different from the norm), disabilities or challenges, then we will always focus on developing special methods tailored to their (inherent) difficulties. We are unlikely to consider that the methods we are using may not really work for the majority; that the successful students may not be the majority or may not be successful because of our methods or that our methods may, in fact, be creating the problems we are attempting to solve. We cannot find what we do not seek.

How does anyone break such a self-perpetuating cycle? Applying the recursive questioning of both action research and the LET approach, and drawing on personal and embodied knowledge, I dismissed the narrative or profile in favor of something that found a strong resonance in my own experience. When I tested the new narrative by changing my own instructional paradigm, the dynamic in my classroom changed profoundly. Since that first semester, the hostility that prompted my living theory inquiry has not been a feature of my classroom. It still occurs sporadically, in individual students. I am absolutely clear about where it comes from and why. And those who have been most antagonistic at the start of the semester, by the end are generally among the students with whom I have the closest relationships. That change has provided me with support for explaining their disaffection and its concomitant behaviors in terms of a deficit not in the students, but in their educational experiences. It also allowed me to propose that this is true for the majority of students who do not begin compulsory schooling with a strong family or community background in Standard American/English culture and language.

Once I perceived the traditional approach as inherently dehumanizing and ineffective, I could look for another. In short, a Living Theory approach to my inquiry allowed me to challenge premises that are normally assumed, premises something like this:

1. There is a pure and proper form of English that we should all strive to speak and write.
2. It can be taught by identifying and repeating the rules of grammar, syntax and punctuation because it is really the language (normative) we all speak when we speak properly.

3. It is the normative version of all English dialects and therefore should come easily to those who make the effort or have the intellectual ability "polish" their own language skills.
4. Difficulties in developing language fluency reflect a lack of intelligence and intellectual ability.

I replaced those with:

1. There is only an agreed convention, an ideal that we use as the medium of professional and academic communication that we call Standard or academic, or formal English.
2. It is natural to no one.
3. Those whose idiolects differ widely from that of the desired "norm," are likely to be disenfranchised because they are devalued by the degree to which their natural idiolect differs from that norm.
4. Disenfranchisement is a better explanation for the poor language skills of my students than lack of either intelligence or academic ability. Formal English, therefore, should not be taught normatively (which is educational colonization) but as a universal medium of national and international human communication – that is, truthfully and respectfully.
5. It is not possible to "improve" one dialect or sub-set into another. Therefore, repairing the disenfranchisement, (the disconnect), must depend on a radically different approach to teaching and learning, rather than "fixing" the students in my classroom.

Part Two: Mending the Disconnect, a New Paradigm for a New Story

Fortunately the radically different approach was both obvious and already tried and tested in foreign language classrooms; it was language immersion, where emphasis is placed on the connection of sound with meaning, echoing the way that human beings naturally learn to speak and think in our native tongues. (This was something I was familiar with from the Gaelic immersion classes to which some of my Scottish friends sent their children.)

> Among the vast array of phenomena that one might loosely consider language- related, the biolinguistic approach focuses attention on a component of human biology that enters into the use and acquisition of language, however one interprets the term "language." Call it the "faculty of language," adapting a traditional term to a new usage. This component is more or less on a par with the systems of mammalian vision, insect navigation, and others.
>
> ...These conditions take us back to the traditional characterization of language, since Aristotle at least, as a system that links sound and meaning. (Chomsky, 2005, p. 9)

Our first language is acquired naturally, rather than consciously learned. Modern language immersion programs emulate the process of acquisition by using repeated exposure to the sounds of a language and visual and experiential association of those sounds with meaning:

> Traditionally, second languages have been taught through a structured approach that focuses on the grammar and functions of language. Strangely enough, this is not the way first languages are acquired. In fact, with first language acquisition, the grammar and functions of language are not customarily taught until the end of primary or the beginning of secondary school, long after individuals have mastered communicative fluency in their native tongue. The immersion model of language learning comes closest to replicating the natural way in which humans acquire their first language. (Chaigne, 2006, p. 1)

Language acquisition is indeed “a biolinguistic function”; the language we speak is “hard-wired” through a network of specific neural pathways that form language “maps” in the brain. The pathways develop as we associate sound with meaning:

> Each child has more than 50,000 nerve pathways that can carry sounds from the human voice from the ears to the brain. The brain encodes the words and actually rearranges its brain cells into connections or networks to produce language.... If a child hears little or no human sound, the brain waits in vain and eventually will "retire" these cells from this function and give these cells a different function. By age 10, if the child has not heard spoken works, the ability to learn spoken language is lost.
>
> In the Indiana study, implants used in young deaf children to introduce human sound actually changed the brain structure so that these youth could begin constructing a vocabulary... A University of Chicago study showed that babies whose mothers talked to them more had a bigger vocabulary. By 24 months, the infants of less talkative moms knew 300 fewer words than babies whose mothers spoke to them frequently. Babies are "listeners" and spoken language reinforces brain connections, which encourage more language development. (Fleming, Brain Keys Language Development, 2002)

Thus conventions governing speech are thus internalized, accessed through specific pathways in the brain created both by and for them. The pathways form maps by which we are able to think, naturally and unconsciously, in shades of meaning and grammatical and syntactic patterns. Our own maps will, moreover, be specific to our national, communal and familial groups, thus connecting us to our communities:

> The way in which we understand "your own words" - as referring only to how you combine them, not what they are - shows that words are owned by a community rather than an individual. If a word isn’t known to everyone around you might as well not use it, because no one will know what you’re talking about. (Pinker, 2007, p. 15)

Our native language, then, is a living part of us - a language that must live in us before we can before we can speak it, aloud or on the page, with a voice that is authentic, is our own.

Since sound is the direct symbol of assigned meaning, written language is an indirect symbol of assigned meaning, i.e. the symbol of a symbol. When we read the indirect symbols (writing), we do not actually see meaning in these; instead, we translate the writing into the sounds it represents and our brains access the meanings of those sounds:

> The mental lexicon, the listener's mental representation of what words sound like and what they mean, stands at the heart of the spoken language comprehension process. The

> phonological properties of lexical items form the immediate target of the early stages of speech analysis. (Marslen-Wilson, Tyler, Waksler, and Older, 1994, p. 3)

If writing patterned the language we speak, there would be clear and direct connections between our internalized language and the rules governing the symbols of those sounds, the "rules" of writing. It would be a straightforward task to understand the code for the symbols, i.e. to interpret and use the written form of language. Pause, falling intonation and breath, long pause, rising inflection, tone of authority – we don't need to learn the use of commas, periods, paragraph indentation, question or exclamation marks in order to use these in daily conversation. Written English, however, does not pattern the English we speak every day. Instead, it patterns an idiolect that is not spoken. How can anyone learn rules, (mechanics), that tell a reader how a text would sound and what the sound means, without knowing how it ought to sound in the first place? Because language is "hard wired" to specific neural maps, it seems obvious that any new language, (or sub-set of a language), will require new and different maps from those created by our first language. And only with these in place can we directly connect the rules for the written symbols to the spoken conventions they refer to.

"The Magic Bullet" – a "Brain Based" Strategy

I was only partially aware of the research, (enough to know roughly how language acquisition worked and to make the connection to my perception of dialect as a second language), when, soon after my Scottish "declamation," I asked my students to choose and listen to readings of classic literature from a selection of free audio books. They were to listen for a period of 20 to 30 minutes daily, to the English of Dickens, Austen, Swift, Twain or other classic authors whose modalities are formal, unfamiliar and difficult.

Students chose their own texts from a very large and varied list and changed them at will if they did not like them. This helped create a sense of ownership, and self-determination quite unlike the "compulsory texts" of high school curricula. As an aid to acquisition, they were asked to listen at bedtime if possible, when most relaxed and receptive. This was not a hard and fast rule. For many, it was more convenient to listen while driving, walking or doing chores – anything repetitive, mechanical and boring and from which the audio book provided a kind of relief. I did not teach grammar, beyond a few "brush up" exercises based on the most common mistakes appearing in students' work. Instead, I set compulsory, directed and reflective oral and written discussions of the "audio book experience" at four-week intervals so as to track changing relationships with the language, changes in fluency, confidence, voice/emerging ownership and proficiency in mechanics. I encouraged students to observe and discuss their own acquisition process and to assign their own values to their experience and learning outcomes. This provided a potentially healing experience with which to replace a long history of performance goals and outcomes that accorded with alien, external values and which discounted the subjective values of the students.

Over the course of a few weeks, as the language became internalized they quite clearly began to think in formal English, then to speak it and to write it. The results were so startling that I have since made the exercise mandatory for all my classes. (It has also been

piloted by a number of other full and part time faculty within my department.) Examples of those results, (excerpted but unedited), are reproduced with students' permission:

> I have noticed that my brain is getting reprogrammed each night I listen to this book. When my wife and I went out to dinner this weekend, our waiter asked us if we would like some more rolls. My reply was "Indeed we would". I have never spoken those words before in my life. (FW - two weeks, personal communication, February 1, 2010)
>
> The title of the audio book a lot'm listening to is the Hobbit by J.R.R Tolkien. It's the story about a hobbit who fines the ring of power. a lot chouse this book because it is very intresting to me and I like ythical creatures a lot. Pluse I hate reading, to me it's just a big wast of time but when listening to a book I can be doing what ever I want so I like listening to books a lot more than reading them. (SD - one week, personal communication, September 14, 2010)
>
> The book I've been listening to is the Lord of the Rings, the Return of the King and my favorite part was the fight between Frodo and golem, the description for that part was just amazing. I have enjoyed listening to the audio books; they have really helped me with my speech. At the same time the voice in my head will not stop, it's always correcting the people around me, and I don't want to correct them because I'm not about to hurt someone's fillings that's not me. I will most likely keep listening to audio books so I don't lose touch with proper English, and plus I have to take English 1010 next semester. (SD, eleven weeks – with erratic completion of assignment, personal communication, November 18, 2010)
>
> The "alchemist," by Paolo Coelho, is a story of a young shepard. The shepard is learning about the meaning of life. He does this through his experiences along the way. He dreams of having a beautiful women, of seeing the worlld, and of finding treasure. He meets exiciting people along the way. Those people send him in new directions throughout his quest. The shepard soon becomes wise to the ways of the world. (Beginning J, personal communication, January 26, 2010)
>
> I do find the audio book popping up in my head, voices if you will. People I interact with on a daily basis, have a very slow way of speaking english. I hear them drag-out and miss-pronounce words. I can't give them too much grief, since I do the same thing. However, at times like these, I think of "The Alchemist." The English used in the audio book is very precise. The narrator does not use unneccessary dialog. The experience makes me want to use more precise dialog. I feel that if my words get anymore snappy, I will lose my job. I look forward to the next audio book; so that I can get this one out of my head. It will be quiet again! Ahhhh! (Middle J, personal communication, March 2, 2010)
>
> I find that lack of time and energy keep me from doing activities I really enjoy. Sitting down and reading a book of any substance is a time consuming process. Therefore, reading often gets put off. The audio book was nice because I did not have to stop what I was doing to enjoy it! I could still eat and drink while listening. I could still drive and listen to it. I could still work and listen to it. I hope you see a theme. Because of their versatility, audio books get an approval from me. Another great facet is the rewind option. If I lost track or trailed off for a moment, I could simply rewind the book and listen again. (End J, personal communication, April 20, 2010)
>
> Hello, my name is M… C…. I was born in Memphis Tn. where I lived till I was nine. After high school I joined the marines as a machine gunner. Decided to move back to Tenn. after the military, that is when I met my wife of seven 7 years. We have to cool little kids together... I am enrolled in P. (College) because I was bored of doing plumbing plus my kids got tired of

> me tracking dirt through there school hallways when I would go to pick them up. (Beginning M. C., introduction - one week, personal communication, September 7, 2010)
>
> The air was icy cold with a smell of snow to it. After all of the open cockpit flights General Chennault had taken over the many years, the weather never really seemed to bother him anymore. Guards stood at attention as General Chennault walked slowly up to the White House door. Even as a hard nosed, battle tested pilot, he still had an unsettling feeling in the bottom of his stomach. This is the first time he had ever been called upon by the president. The guards led him to a small office that smelled of old cigarette smoke. There sat the commander-in-chief, President Franklin D Roosevelt drinking a martini with a serious look on his face. The President offered a chair for the general to sit in - but no martini. Chennault sat in silence waiting for the president to speak. President Roosevelt took a hit from his cigarette and a sip of his martini before beginning to talk. "I assume you have no clue why you are here, do you general?" "No Mr. President, I do not". "I want you to train men for my Special Air Unit". (End M. C. - fourteen weeks, personal communication, December 2, 2010)

The salient characteristics of the progress curve tend to hold true for all those students who undertake the assignment as prescribed, (consistently and persistently). In short, they develop levels of fluency, enjoyment, originality, ownership and confidence not normally associated with developmental students. In 2010, I taught a class in which the majority of students fulfilled my requirement of listening for twenty to thirty minutes daily. At around twelve weeks into the semester, these students suddenly began mastering punctuation, grammar, spelling and syntax. I was perplexed until I realized that, as formal English was mapped by the brain, years of grade school "drill and skill," (in rules that had previously borne no relation to any internal language), had simply "kicked in." Or perhaps the "universal grammar" function had begun to operate upon this now embedded language:

> In cracking the code of language, the children's minds must be constrained to pick out just the right kinds of generalizations from the speech around them. They can't get sidetracked by how sentences sound but must dig into the grammatical structure hidden in the words and their arrangement. It is this line of reasoning that led the linguist Noam Chomsky to propose that language acquisition in children is the key to understanding the nature of language, and that children must be equipped with an innate Universal Grammar: a set of plans for the grammatical machinery that powers all human languages. (Pinker, 2007, p. 30)

In either case, it had become relevant to the students' own linguistic thought processes. In other words, as they developed a reference base in the spoken language, the grammatical and syntactical rules they had memorized began to make sense. In an initial, comparison study of entry and exit writing samples from eighteen, year intake and ability-matched students, (nine of whom were "controls" who did not complete the audio assignment), mechanical improvement tended to be slightly higher in the "immersion" group. However the "listeners" also showed a marked superiority in sophistication of ideas and language structure, engagement, ownership, risk taking and voice in general – all qualities illustrated by the above examples.[5] What I did not then know, was that silent listening has been shown to be an important step in the natural process of language

[5] While the informal status of the research at this stage prevents publication of the samples studied, examples illustrating the degree and rapidity of language acquisition and the kinds of "non typical" work produced by these "developmental" writing students are included in this paper.

acquisition. During normal language development, as Krashen remarks (p. 8): “Children are usually allowed to go through a “silent period,” during which they build up acquired competence through active listening. Several scholars have suggested that providing such a silent period for all performers in second language acquisition would be beneficial” (see for example, Postovsky, 1977).

Interestingly, as acquisition took place some of the “oppressed” became “oppressors.” Sometimes, the former hostility towards academic English underwent a volte-face, to be replaced by intolerance towards... the local vernacular:

> I really enjoyed listening to my audio books. I was not sure how this would actually help me in my speech, but now I have this little voice in my head saying, hey are you going to correct them or what. When I first started, I would get frustrated because I could not pay attention to the tape and what activity I was doing at the same time, however that was not how this process was supposed to be done. I decided to just put the headphones on and go; to my surprise it works. There is something soothing about someone reading to you, maybe it stems from being read to as a child. I am definitely going to keep on listening to my audiobooks, the reward is so high, and the effort is so low. Now I can try to get my kids involved in not just reading books, but also listening to them. (Middle M.C. - twelve weeks, personal communication, November 16, 2010)
>
> I have always been somewhat perturbed by the slang and improper verbiage common to the south. Listening to the audio book, doing the grammar exercises, and just sitting in our writing class twice a week has made it much worse... It makes me judge people, which isn’t right, but I can’t help it! (SR, Audio Book 2 - six weeks, personal communication, March 4, 2010)
>
> It would be one thing if they were just uneducated, but a lot of them even have college degrees. It is a conscious choice for some people to speak improperly in order to fit in or sound “cool” I guess. It has helped me notice when I am speaking improperly as well. Every now and then, my surroundings rub off on me and I say something completely improper. I am able to catch this quicker and more often, which has helped me in my writing. Even though it has helped my writing skills, I would almost rather be ignorant to proper English because listening to people around east Tennessee makes me want to scream!
>
> My relationship with English has dramatically changed thanks to my audio book. Every time I hear someone speak the wheels in my brain start turning. I find myself not really concentrating on what their saying, but concentrating on how they are saying it. This really annoys me! Will I ever get back to the world where we all just babble back and forth with each other and I could care less how the words are pronounced? My English is not perfect by any means and it never bothered me until now. This class and the audio books have helped me with my writing skills tremendously. I carefully look over what I have written now for errors and I am always proofreading everyone else’s work. (KG - six weeks, personal communication, March 3, 2010)
>
> After listening to my audio book I started noticing that I was using formal English when I would sing the words to a song on the radio. That was the first thing that I noticed, because normally I would never do such a thing. I would always use the same slang that the artist did. The second thing that I noticed was having the want to stop conversations to simply correct the improper use of a word. I never do stop a conversation for this reason, but I always have a strong urge to. (SB - six weeks, personal communication, October 19, 2010)
>
> Indeed my relationship with English has transformed for the better. It's scary actually to hear the calculations in my head. I'm always listening for commas, beginnings and endings. Lately

> it has been the tense phrases...It is very freighting to hear the ways other people are talking these days. The urge to correct them is eating me alive! (SD - seven weeks, personal communication, October 25, 2010)
>
> ... I started listening to the audio book while I drove around, and I started listening to my friends when I would stop driving. That is when I realized I needed to start an English class for my friends or find new ones. I realized I was getting mad at them all of the time, because none of them could even speak one sentence without sounding retarded... Now I use proper English most of the time while speaking, or at least try to. I only talk like my friends when they can't understand what I am saying, because the words are too big or there are complete sentences in my delivery. (JM - thirteen weeks, personal communication, April 23, 2010)

This was a shock when I first observed it. From a mechanical point of view, it indicated that once students began thinking in academic English, within a remarkably short space of time this became the customary "map" the brain used, rendering even their own dialects "other." That a language we no longer think in will inevitably become something different and apart from ourselves is a fascinating phenomenon to observe. The persistence of the socio-linguistic hierarchy, however, continues to surprise me and is far less welcome. Directed discussions as part of in-class and written dialogs, have helped to mitigate the "superiority swing" with humor providing the most valuable of all my resources, (humor of the "have we just become the a^#holes we used to hate?" variety). This is, for me, an area of ongoing inquiry and reflection that may raise more questions than it answers about the role and uses of language.

Towards a New Narrative of the Developmental Student

I have presented the work of my students to sharp intakes of breath, delighted laughter, shock and even tears of joy from fellow educators as they saw explicit proof of how much more capable and impressive are our students than the prevailing mythology, the "story" about them would admit. And this points, I believe, to a truth long hidden in plain sight; the deficiency does not lie, and never has lain with our them; it lies with an educational approach which might have been designed to achieve the opposite of its actual purpose; that is, it could have been engineered to alienate most of our children from formal English. It has certainly succeeded in doing so for the vast majority of high school graduates and yet we keep doing the same thing, doing it more intensively, and expecting a better result.

The results described here also suggest that, when it is successful, the traditional approach represents a form of linguistic study for those who already speak the dialect. I mean those, for example, whose parents read to them and encourage them to read, who use formal English constructions in their own speech or associate with those who do. In other words, when it comes to the key component of the learning process, (authentic immersion), the true variable is not the ability of the individual student so much as "the luck of the draw." Pupils who must depend solely on classroom and teaching methods that ignore the real basis of linguistic development, will struggle. Our current approach mistakes the methods traditionally employed in the classroom for the primary learning resource. In fact, for those who do not experience the language outside the classroom, it is not even a secondary resource. It is an irrelevance.

What stands in the way of widespread recognition of this truth, is a set of assumptions underpinning a story that is as pernicious as it is pervasive. The story says that there is something wrong with those students who do not benefit from our compulsory, public education system. Like all institutional stories, it protects the institution that has generated. Institutions, like individuals, resist criticism. And if there is nothing wrong with our students then there is clearly something wrong with us, or with the way we are doing things. What "we already know" about low-level learners assures us that the problem lies with the abilities of the students and repels any inquiry or strategy that challenges this narrative. This may explain why a 1997 paper by Seth Katz and Sarah Stevens, did not immediately revolutionize our classrooms:

> As opposed to conventional instruction in grammar, immersion has been shown to be the most effective way to acquire a second language… For most Americans, Standard English is, in essence, a second language because they do not use it in everyday conversation. In immersion programs, students do not study language directly but learn a second language as a byproduct of using that language in studying other content areas. Only after students have acquired some facility with the second language do they begin to study language itself and to refine their usage and style.
>
> ...Immersion would succeed as a method for teaching native English speakers the Standard Dialect because immersion imitates the process by which children acquire their first language skills in their home dialect: children do not acquire language by discreet lessons, assignments, and examinations; rather, children acquire language holistically, through immersion in the home, through parents' gentle and persistent coaching and correction, and through children's own desire to understand and communicate ideas about the world and themselves. Noam Chomsky explains the language acquisition process:
>
> Language learning is not really something the child does, it is something that happens to the child placed in an appropriate environment, much as the child's body grows and matures in a predetermined way when provided appropriate nutrition and environmental stimulation. (Katz and Stevens, p. 134)

If they were right, (and they were), then we had been – we still are – approaching the teaching of Standard English from an entirely erroneous starting point… and with dreadful results.

For students who are not disbarred by specific learning disabilities such as impaired hearing, there exists a fast, effective, (non-colonizing), route to mastering academic English. Each semester, and in just fifteen short weeks, a number of my students will become wonderful writers with voices and fluency superior to the requirements of college entry level English. I have experienced the transformative effect on the classroom for an instructor as well as for students. It is there in the young woman who told me, twirling, after she delivered a research report on the suspension of Habeas Corpus in America, (her choice of topic), "I can't believe I wrote this! I actually did this! I'm so proud of myself!" I see it in the numerous "reflections" I get from students about the way that they see themselves and their abilities now that they are actually able to enjoy writing, or about what it feels like to know that what they have to say matters:

> Listening to the audio books, like I have been doing, has pushed my vocabulary to show itself more. I only wish I had listened to them more during the beginning of the semester. I, with a lot of my classmates, enjoyed the times we went to the café and ate pizza... I will take a lot

from this class, such as listening to audio books or speeches before writing, being able to say my opinion with a higher formality of thought behind it, the heightened ability to write in Academic English, and understanding of English itself. I will look back on this class as a huge stepping stone for my brightening future. (B, personal communication, December 9, 2012)

I have looked at all of my assignments and notice that I have improved tremendously. I was told early in the semester that I shouldn't use such big words. I notice now, my writing flows more easily when I choose smaller ones. Although I still prefer to use the bigger words, I think listening to the use of formal English has help enable me to use them correctly. I feel that the past few months of countless hours studying, and finding a relationship with my inner voice, has prepared me for my college experience. I have enjoyed learning the skills to become a better writer, and I will take them with me throughout my college career. (S, personal communication, December 10, 2010)

When I submitted my first paper, I wasn't really sure what to expect. I was a little nervous and not certain if I was going to be capable of writing a college level paper. Then I received your feedback, and I felt my self-confidence grow. You helped me see that I can do this; even though I have not been in school for many years. You helped me find the strength to write, and because of that, I now believe that I can graduate and secure my dreams. I have to tell you I was scared to death, and I didn't really know if college would be right for me, but then there you were. You gave me the push I needed. You helped me see that I have the intelligence to make it. I know I am far from perfect, but you allowed me to see that I don't need to be perfect to become a good writer. (C, personal communication, December 9, 2012)

Looking back on my first two discussions has been comical. I never realized how big of a change I have actually made in my writing, and word usage. I did not believe that my inner voice would even change from negative to positive, but I was proven wrong...There were so many memorable moments in class, especially when we started doing our research papers. There was so much info that we all uncovered that was interesting, moving even. I have had a fantastic time in this class, and getting to know my classmates. I'm sad that we have to leave so soon it feels like we just entered this class just yesterday. Trying to become better writers, and not believing Ms. Salyers when she said that the audio books will help us learn formal English. I was a little skeptical about this learning method, but now I love audio books, and all the other learning methods I have learned during my time in this class... I would have never thought I would be able to write good papers, or move an audience. (J, personal communication, December 12, 2012)

I feel that my relationship with language and writing has grown tremendously. Looking back on my first couple of pieces, I am thinking to myself, "Who wrote that?" I like that fact that I have learned that everyone has their own way of formal English. And that there isn't a wrong form of it, just wrongly used grammar. I learned that I am capable of creating very good pieces of work but I used to get caught up into making myself sound better by using bigger words, which isn't necessary... (B, personal communication, December 13, 2012)

My relationship with English has change, I have grown to really love, and understand how it works. Come to find out English was a second language to me, and I thought I understood English. As, time went on I realized that I had a lot to learn. English and I have become great friends over this semester. I have learned that I need to stop listening to the negative voices, and pay more attention to the positive voices. I still let my negative voice tell me that I'm not able to do something...I have also learned about myself that I am an active student. That if I continue to push myself that I will have a very successful future. What I took away from English 0810, is that I decide my own future. (A, personal communication, December 14, 2012)

> I love this class. This was the best English class I ever took in my life. I feel like I have learned more than I ever have. My English has gotten better over to course of the year. My parents tell me all the time that I sound proper. Where I live it is country. Use to I would sound like a red neck when I talked, now I sound like a young business man. Part of the reason I sound so proper is because of the audio books. The audio books have helped me tremendously. I can now put the commas in a sentence properly... I can see now that the audio books actually help. At first I thought that they were just stupid, but now I realize that they are the best text book to own (because they are free). I will truly miss this class. (M, personal communication, December 15, 2010)

And I experience it most of all in the feedback I cherish above every other, "I love you, Mrs. Salyers," (all the more moving when it comes from a forty year old adult), and which is a common occurrence by the second half of the semester. I know, without having the means, or desire, to prove the hypothesis, that when a student discovers his or her own ability after years of failure, of educational oppression and of a dreadful self-efficacy, that the effect of that discovery can be measured in joy, delight, pride, gratitude and even love for the perceived medium of that discovery - just as much as in those outcomes that count in academia: higher scores, better products and a greater likelihood of persistence. My informal follow up of students over two years, as well as informal evidence from colleagues, continues to point to a remarkable transformation in student efficacy. I can touch it in the students I meet on campus who are still at college when the statistics say that they should not be; in the ones who tell me I have "changed their lives."

A strategy that provides a basis for language ownership does many things. It repairs the emotional "disconnect" previously described. As an "owner," one who speaks the local language fluently, someone can become part of a local community. Thus a student will experience himself or herself as being a real member of the college and the academic community. The curriculum and the classroom are transformed for, once a student achieves a degree of ownership of a language that has hitherto characterized the alien and the oppressive, the realm of inquiry and discourse move from away from mechanics, to the enjoyable challenges of ideation, articulation, argument and expression. Competency, fluency, confidence and enjoyment of assigned and classroom work in general are, in their turn, all hugely impacted - and these are far more relevant to the long-term success of individual students than any test score. This is a qualitatively different, and more rewarding endeavor for all involved and one that speaks to the aims and ideals, as well as the needs, of authentic and humanizing education.

Post Script: From the Subjective, the Objective.

When I began this inquiry in 2009, and until recently, I had difficulty framing it within the context of subjective experience. I am the product of an educational system, much like the one that fashioned my students, in which objects and outcomes are all important. New to the practice of action research, I was still focused on the outcomes to be recorded or explained and, despite intense efforts to internalize the rationale behind AR, I remained unable to see the central role of the process, the journey that generated those outcomes. I could not have articulated that position, any more than a fish can describe the water in which it swims, but I was all the more constrained and directed by this "unawareness." With

exposure to action research, came recognition through experience, that the objectivist, academic standpoint so long, so exclusively and so universally applied, has produced true absurdities.

One such absurdity still dominates much of academia; it is the assumption that any "sound" inquiry must be entirely independent of the "I" of whoever is conducting it, a view that holds sway even in "soft" sciences, such as the study of human relationships. We now know, of course, that there is no such thing as "pure" objectivism. The ideal is pure fiction – and anachronistic, fiction at that. Twentieth century science long ago placed the observer and the observed within a single, indivisible continuum. Twenty first century science continues to demonstrate this stricture in even the most rigorous and impersonal of the sciences. While it is increasingly challenged by the paradigms of action research and LET, modern academia in general has yet to acknowledge, let alone encompass this revolutionary paradigm within its methodology:

> In the 20th century, physics was forced into the position of re-evaluating the role of the observer, both in relativity and in quantum mechanics. In relativity, the absolutes of Newtonian physics were banished, and observations obtained by observers in different frames of reference became all that was available. These observations were linked through a system of coordinate transformations.
>
> In quantum mechanics, the observer and the system being observed became mysteriously linked so that the results of any observation seemed to be determined in part by actual choices made by the observer. This situation is represented by the wave function, a function in the complex domain that contains information about both the cosmos at large and the observer's apparent state of knowledge. (Kolecki, 2004)

Intellectually, I have come to view the paradigm of academic objectivism as operating both from a false premise and with a degree of dishonesty. The false premise is that within any field of human inquiry, including the humanities, the social sciences and the arts, there exist "purely objective truths" that can be usefully severed from the subjective humanity of their discoverers. The dishonesty - identified and articulated so clearly by Polanyi - arises from an unconscious desire to protect that false premise from exposure as a myth. And it is visible in the verbal gymnastics, the contrivances, by which the impossibility of truly eliminating subjectivity is commonly disguised:

> ...We may infer that the confidence placed in physical theory owes much to its possessing the same kind of excellence from which pure geometry and pure mathematics in general derive their interest, and for the sake of which, they are cultivated.
>
> We cannot truly account for our acceptance of such theories without endorsing our acknowledgment of a beauty that exhilarates and a profundity that entrances us. Yet the prevailing conception of science, based on the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, seeks – and must seek at all costs – to eliminate from science such passionate, personal, human appraisals of theories, or at least to minimize their function to that of a negligible by-play...
>
> The term simplicity...is used for smuggling an essential quality into our appreciation of scientific theory, which a mistaken conception of objectivity forbids us openly to acknowledge...I shall call this practice a pseudo-substitution. It is used for playing down man's real and indispensable intellectual powers for the sake of maintaining an, "objectivist" framework which in fact cannot account for them. (Polanyi, 1974, p. 15-16)

Ethically, I oppose the cult of objectivity as inimical to authentic human learning and development and pernicious through its dehumanization of those engaged in academic endeavor. That there can be any such a thing as an educational process in which human relationship is less than the ground and source of all learning is patently absurd. Yet we have crafted an educational edifice in which human relationship is considered a mere by-product of the process of transferring information from one, supposedly independent and unrelated source, (teacher), to another, (student). Since this is precisely the reverse of the truth, we conduct our educational programs through a haze of cognitive dissonance, one in which the impact and interaction of personalities and assumptions is discounted while the test scores that reflect those impacts and interactions are used to define the abilities and set the futures of generation after generation of students. In this dehumanizing model of what education is, and is for and how it "does it" we see the fruit of what Polanyi describes as "the crippling mutilations which centuries of objectivist thought have imposed on the minds of men" (Polanyi, 2974, p. 381).

The objective findings described in this paper are valid and important but these do not explain themselves, their own genesis. In fact, these valid objects hang from the underlying structure of a much more fundamental framework:

> I am arguing that the propositional form is masking the living form and content of an educational theory which can generate valid descriptions and explanations for the educational development of individuals. This is not to deny the importance of propositional forms of understanding. I am arguing for a reconstruction of educational theory into a living form of question and answer which includes propositional contributions from the traditional disciplines of education. (Whitehead, 2009, p. 2)

Any discovery can occur only within a context that allows of its possibility in the first place; we do not find what we do not seek. The assumptions we bring to our classrooms, the cultural or social narratives we unconsciously impose or reinforce, are the context that determines what we do and do not seek in and of our students. And it is these assumptions and narratives, not the educational theories we might espouse that ultimately define the limits of possibility.

This is true context. Without it, the cycles of distinction, articulation and reflection that fuel the continuous evolution of new discovery are stillborn. And any educational theory whose true context has been erased by academic objectivism, stands in danger of becoming a new kind of tyranny, a formula imposed on educators and students alike only to be succeeded by the next in a procession of fashionable "fixes" whose failures and successes can neither instruct nor inform the future. As Paulo Freire in "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed" says:

> Education as the practice of freedom -- as opposed to education as the practice of domination -- denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. (Freire, 2000)

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