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Seeing Writing Whole: The Revolution We Really Need

Keith Rhodes

Abstract: Composition classes have difficulty achieving the aims of the CCCC position statement entitled Students' Right to Their Own Language, for reasons related to why we have difficulty integrating calls for building rhetorical listening more fully into our curricula. A fundamental assumption that writers alone are responsible for the success of written communication leads to results that sustain privileged discourse and upset any sense that readers, too, have an obligation in any written transaction. A field of Writing, properly constituted, needs to challenge that assumption of readerly privilege overtly so that we can shift toward teaching students better ways to manage that entire transaction; meanwhile, we should emphasize practices that weaken the grip of readerly privilege, such as Elbow's integration of the vernacular into writing and expanded efforts to use Young's code-meshing approaches with broader audiences of students.

The Need for a Writing Revolution

I wish to propose a true revolution: a way of thinking about writing that has little continuity with how the field of rhetoric and composition has traditionally presented it. While I build this call out of existing scholarship, I mean to urge a further step, openly declaring that composition and writing classes are simply no longer what we have traditionally said they are. We need a revolution that radically re-positions the scholarship that we do, the courses that we teach, and even how we identify ourselves. Above all, I propose that an identified profession of Writing should focus on the entire transaction of writing, focusing at least as strongly on how writing is read. And by this I don't mean reading in the traditional sense of closely reading fine literature and difficult texts; I mean developing the ability to read a diverse range of texts written by everyday writers, listening to a diverse range of voices with enhanced interpretive ability. No longer should we put the entire burden of successful writing on writers. Instead, a discipline of Writing should treat readers and writers as equally responsible partners in forming meaning by means of written words.

As a small example of the difference that could make, we might turn toward addressing the possible reading deficiencies of those who complain about "bad writing." For a teasing example, we might worry about the intellectual deficiencies of anyone who genuinely cannot interpret a series of terms unless it contains an Oxford comma. That is, the changes that matter have much less to do with trying to teach students how to please powerful audiences and much more to do with linguistic diversity, with what Krista Ratcliffe has called rhetorical listening, with what Patrick Sullivan more plainly calls listening and reading, with what Peter Elbow has called vernacular eloquence. And this change seeks, at last, to build structural support for students' genuine rights to their own language. So as revolutions go, it rather conservatively draws on a great deal of current knowledge and theory; but it rather radically proposes that we cannot hope to use that

theory effectively within the current paradigm of writer-focused writing classes—classes that make writers and their assumed deficiencies the entire focus, thereby giving currently empowered readers mastery over writing.

It might sound odd to say that the current paradigm gives readers mastery over writing, but that's a natural outgrowth of a rhetorical focus on audience, and it is perhaps the most critical problem with the current paradigm. True, in composition classes we sometimes position writers as textual heroes, boldly going forth to change the world with their assertions. But notice what we ask of students in doing so: study your rhetorical situation and fit into it as well as possible, attending carefully to audience and genre. In terms of any transferable skill, audience looms overwhelmingly over the entire transaction. The lesson sent by this focus on audience is to please those in power—the normal audiences for which students expect to write (and write for in school, too, to please their graders).

Further, scholars—in our field and beyond—internalize and model the submissive rhetorical stance that comes with that paradigm. It's not mysterious why IMRaD format has become increasingly dominant, nor why scholarship seems increasingly required to have literature reviews and to “create a research space,” in John Swales' oft-repeated phrase. In Bakhtin's term, we've made scholarly writing, too, increasingly “monologic,” focused on having authors prove that they partake of the “conversation in the field,” fluent in all the latest genre conventions, jargon, and (ahem) affordances. It's almost as if the most successful writer will be one who surprises us the least, conforming most expertly to the model we already imagine, constructing readers as masters to be served in precise, settled ways. (By the way, I fully intend the sexist connotations of “master,” believing patriarchy to be a significant part of the current paradigm, even if I will leave that particular argument to more expert voices.) This readerly hegemony drives most of the need for revolution. Pedagogical gains within such a submissive construct rarely tend toward the risky—and highly productive—dangers of open-ended problem-solving. Instead, an attitude of writerly submission inculcated in composition classes bleeds out into the larger culture, generating a good portion of the complaint that “Students/graduates can't write.” That is, if a vast and varied multitude of readers feel entitled to read exactly what they expect, it's not surprising that they rarely get it from novices in writing such things. But I argue that there's more wrong with that attitude than with our writers, and that it creates more problems than it solves—for writers, readers, and for the culture writ large. Thus, in this article I will also defy that submissive convention to some extent—no doubt to the displeasure of those whose reading of this text might be most deeply constructed by it.

The revolution we need must upset this paradigm and dash that mythic dream of solving all problems of written communication at the site of production. Instead, a post-revolutionary discipline would explore the full transaction of writing—its production and its uses, what goes right and wrong with both, and why. Scholarship in the field similarly would lose its grounding in the concerns surrounding the artificially constructed situation of first-year Composition and move more fully into exploring more often what goes right and wrong in writing activities that occur naturally elsewhere. Above all, it would pay rich attention to the issues of style and genre, in all their social complexity, examining how we might expand both writers' *palettes* and readers' *palates*—how we

might improve both production and consumption of varied language and forms, unified into a study of inventive interpretation. That work entails moving outward and examining such things in writings generated for direct purposes in workplaces, social media, civic forums, and personal exchanges. Many scholars already do this work, but in a way that focuses mostly on what writers might do better rather than on how the entire transaction might work better. As Sullivan explains well (85-94) in his own call to revolution, research into how people read would need extensive expansion, building upon scholarship currently focused largely on K12 language arts. But a field of Writing would then need to upset the normally submissive power relations of school reading, too, focusing less on interpreting and instrumentalizing the meanings being expressed by more empowered writers and focusing more on learning to interpret and use the expressions of all writers—including especially the less empowered voices and dialects that everyday readers encounter constantly in life and at work.

That is, the move into valuing and studying a full range of writing calls us to study and value a full range of reading as a necessary, complementary piece. Put most simply, the revolution we need brings reading into play as part of the problem with writing. And to the extent that something is not working, the abilities of both writers and readers in the scene would merit examination and critique. Ultimately, in our classes we'd then want to teach students about this entire transaction, developing transformable practices of both writing and reading that can help writing transactions fulfill these needs, broadly imagined.

But first, we need a revolution. And one strong priority should be making "Students' Right to Their Own Language" a genuine goal, a goal that is crucial to any sense that we have generated a "successful" profession. The current profession of rhetoric and composition/writing studies has not done that; it has not yet really even tried. By saying that, I do not mean to diminish the enormous importance and quality of the position statement adopted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1974, entitled "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (hereinafter often referred to as the "Statement"). Indeed, the true disciplinary centrality of that Statement to a more complete field of writing drives my entire interest in this argument. We would all be better off if that thoroughly researched and well-established position became an ordinary part of the social order, not just of writing as a profession and area of study, but of America, the West, the World.

The problem with the Statement, ultimately, is one of genre. The Statement falls into the category of "thoughts and prayers," a ceremonial plea and lament, when it needs to be a plan for strategic action. We know this by its effects. The Statement has had meager impact on how writing is taught and evaluated. Teaching under its direction remains a dubious practice in potentially leading lambs to slaughter (and, most likely, tossing any such aberrant sheepdogs in with them). Despite the themes of the most current CCCCs, even in light of Asao Inoue's call for antiracist assessment and Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rusty Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy's ambitious advocacy of codemeshing, responsible teachers still have great cause to fear implementing the Statement. That fear persists even though our current profession still has no proven, viable means for preparing students to acquire the valued languages of power if they have not been raised to them already. Progressive yearnings to offer students this "right" crash

and recede like waves washing against the rocky cliffs of things like the stated course goals of our composition programs, the most popular textbooks for composition, and even aspirational documents like the Association of American Colleges & Universities' "Written Communication VALUE Rubric" and the "WPA Outcomes Statement." In many years, we might pry away a few rocks of resistance by incremental means like those we've used so far.

Even my plea cannot yet escape that paradigm—and neither does the "Statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language" itself, by the way. Like most if not all of my readers here, I am privileged under this current paradigm, thoroughly habituated to use something like the language of power. A few stylistic twists to the contrary, I rarely venture outside disciplinary language conventions, ones which Elbow reminds us construct nobody's true home language (4). Thus, both intentionally and habitually, I conform, as our students understand they must do as well; and as they also fear in our classes, I may well be "disciplined" for my failure to do so more fully. The current profession has established a rhetorical situation in which contending for a right to home language would contradict the most essential socially constructed purpose of the current paradigm: preparing all writers to bear the entire burden of submissively serving up to their reading masters whatever those reading masters might want. Within such a paradigm, to talk of a writer's "right" to anything—not just home language, but anything at all—is a plain absurdity. Our current professional organizations, and all our work, and all our students, are "servile" not as a matter of choice, an option among many others, but as a necessary outcome of the current paradigm. And so long as the system with which we are identified consists only of production, addresses only what the writer might do to improve the communicative transaction, the Statement cannot be anything other than ceremonial and wishful. One might as well talk of the right to ignore gravity.

Similarly, any attempt by current professional organizations in the field to implement the Statement would yield to that same gravitational pull. Certainly, all our outlets welcome and support the most fervent advocates of such a thing. But even the most expert advocacy becomes accepted somewhat like a species of wishful faith healing; when the "patients" need urgent care, we turn to more orthodox methods—even when, at the present stage of pedagogical development, those methods are about as effective in "curing" home language as bloodletting and trepanation were at curing disease.

The Problem with Evolution Rather Than Revolution

We can imagine solving this limited problem of "correctness" eliding the right to home language with a mere shift of framing, but the current paradigm of readerly hegemony will not permit it. A profession of Writing would need to follow up that argument for the priority of home language over correctness with concerted disciplinary action showing that it believes its own case—something that, judging by its actions, the current profession seems unable to do. Most likely, we need a true revolution, and that revolution must be one of practice, not just of talk.

But what practice? We have some contenders. Most famously in our scholarship, Krista Ratcliffe's method of "rhetorical listening" fits extraordinarily well with the post-revolutionary agenda that I have sought to sketch out. Attending to the entire writing

transaction necessarily works in the ways Ratcliffe explains. Right now, culturally dominant parties assume they can simply stand back as empowered audiences and expect others to cater to their whims, greatly interfering with both the efficiency and equity of communication. A more efficient, thorough, and effective rhetorical method would entail engaging dominant parties in rhetorical listening—in meeting speakers and writers closer to the source of the communication, in more fully shared language. In fact, I think of Ratcliffe as providing a very large portion of the particulars for a post-revolution discipline of Writing, such that I can save much time simply by saying, “Read Ratcliffe!”

Yet we must also attend carefully to why Ratcliffe’s own work has not yet had such an effect, and why more unorthodox efforts make sense. In sum, Ratcliffe presents elegant, refined arguments to narrow audiences. To be unfair and listen badly for a moment, it is as if Ratcliffe imagines that, to stage the revolution, we need only persuade a narrow band of well-published scholars within our own field, and the rest would unfold from on high. But the first problem with such a view, even in a more generous form, is that the hierarchies of privilege within this profession itself have been built within the old paradigm. Appealing to that privileged internal elite so expertly will deservedly—and so also problematically—earn great praise within those ranks. But it also produces texts that prove uninviting, to say the least, to the larger external audiences we also need to persuade.

To be more fair, certainly it is enough to ask of anyone to write such brilliantly insightful and profound work as Ratcliffe’s; now it falls to her readers to translate it and apply it and spread the word. Ratcliffe has attended carefully to the practical work that she seeks to foster, providing useful examples from her own teaching and very specific pedagogical frameworks for using them. Even so, I can’t help but wonder at the degree to which Ratcliffe’s own rhetorical choices seem unnecessarily limiting. At bottom, Ratcliffe’s work seems far more promising for use after the revolution than as its means—a plan for what experts need to build within a new field rather than a means to get there.

By contrast, Patrick Sullivan has clearly aimed at broader audiences in writing his own argument for a stronger focus on the reception of texts. His style reaches out in various ways—using plain and familiar language, translating any necessary specialized language, attending to readerly “flow” with techniques like highly indicative subtitles, and using methods like repetition and narrative to help readers settle into his arguments more comfortably. He then provides extensive, clearly explained teaching materials capable of being lifted and used nearly “as is” to accomplish the goals for which he advocates. Clearly, Sullivan has written to be read and understood by a broader audience, and he shows great attention to that complementary responsibility of speaking to be heard. Meanwhile, he shares with Ratcliffe a distinctly practical orientation, similarly seeking very particular changes in teaching and going a good distance toward explaining and enabling them. Further, he directly states his revolutionary intent. He has a chapter entitled “Revolution” (98). His closing paragraph consists of this one sentence, repeated from earlier use: “The time for revolution is now” (184).

Like Ratcliffe, Sullivan urges “a pedagogy of listening” (2). In brief summary, he urges eschewing simplistic “essay” formats and even argumentation itself, asking students instead to pursue exploratory, reflective writing that engages fully with what they are reading and hearing, seeing the flow of that engagement as the main goal. Like Rat-

cliffe, Sullivan extends “listening” to reading, in fact urging that writing teachers spend a great deal more time and thoughtful effort building students’ abilities to read as good listeners (85-90). In pursuit of getting us to join his revolution, Sullivan provides copious and detailed practical advice.

So again, there is an extent to which I can shorten much of this argument into simply “Read Sullivan!” And to be fair, five or six years is not a lot of time to give for a scholarly book to achieve any kind of far-reaching revolutionary impact. Yet I suspect that Sullivan’s use of a different sort of rhetorical tactic may hinder its genuinely revolutionary impact. That is, for a revolutionary, Sullivan seems curiously eager to show that everything he urges already fits well within a broad *status quo ante*. The text makes frequent resort to long quotations from existing, well-regarded texts, showing how extensively his main ideas have already been thought out by others. I imagine him in the guise of the Wizard of Oz, telling us that we already have everything we seek, needing only to acknowledge it in some ceremonial way. But without the magical ruby slippers, Dorothy wasn’t getting home to Kansas. Actually getting somewhere is a horse of a different color.

When I think of the work left largely aside in Sullivan’s agenda, I am pointed back to Ratcliffe. That is, the revolution that will create a pedagogy of listening will necessarily require challenging well-entrenched cultural power dynamics. It’s not a revolution that we can successfully prosecute in our classrooms alone, with a change of lesson plans. At every level above classroom teachers, powerful figures will disagree, and strongly, with what such teachers would be doing. The revolution that Sullivan imagines won’t fit departmental course goals, expressed institutional general education goals, or the idea of “writing” in the minds of authorities beyond the Composition program (or even, often enough, within it). Most teachers can’t afford to storm these particular barricades. Despite all its rhetorical generosity in surface matters, Sullivan’s argument may well have a very small and limited real audience: writing teachers already empowered to teach as they wish, or at least to teach consistently with this particular vision. In a different sort of way, Sullivan again provides a teleological vision, but not yet the means, for revolution.

And all that should seem normal and expected. Anyone working within the current paradigm ultimately either sustains it or simply runs up against its constraints and can go no farther. The composition teacher’s tools will not tear down and rebuild the composition teacher’s course goals—well, at least not without some transitional work.

Speculative Steps Toward the Revolution

I openly confess to have no final set answer; but the kinds of directions we could explore seem clear enough to offer as speculative instruments, at least. Some who have read earlier versions of this argument have been dismayed (to use an understated casting of the reaction) that I have no more exact direction or manifesto to offer. But I think the reality here is that the shift in direction that I propose is at once so simple and so disruptive that only a fool would seek to claim exactly how it would go and how it might end up. And so for other readers this argument has seemed profoundly frightening, a leap into the void that could disrupt professional structures and career paths in this already frag-

ile and often threatened profession. My sense, then, is that my greatest responsibility is to propose next steps—things to do now from within current structures that could have revolutionary consequences without simply burning down the house.

I suggest that code-meshing steps most ably into this breach, so long as we extend the concept by means that could make it a more universal approach—and I will suggest that approaching code-meshing by means of imitation offers those means. That's potentially a revolutionary step that we could take in our classrooms very soon, under the plausible and genuine guise of teaching better rhetoric, and particularly better attention to style and genre.

I'll also now confess to believing that teaching writing very strongly entails teaching style—especially in Kate Ronald's sense of producing writing that sounds as if someone is at home in the text, an intuitive much more than a formalistic endeavor. I could go on and on about that, having researched it as my main area of professional focus for many years (see, e.g., Rhodes). My brutally concise summary of that work is that students benefit greatly from experimenting with a broad range of styles, especially if that work is grounded in social and rhetorical considerations. On closer study, it turns out that they benefit little, in the long run, from being offered "codes of power," such as Joseph Williams's admittedly astute formulae for clarity; such formalistic instruction simply doesn't "take." Thus, above all, students need to build a kind of intuitive, creative intelligence to work well with what Ann Berthoff so aptly called the "allatonicness" of writing.

"Code-meshing," in Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera, and Lovejoy's meaning of the term, helps students to "mesh" their home languages with languages of power. It's intentionally opposed to "code-switching"—asking those who speak and write disfavored dialects to learn the languages of power, and to use those empowered dialects exclusively when conversing with those in power. Its central feature—"meshing" rather than switching codes, producing texts that blend features of home and privileged dialects—helps students view, as the authors say, "Standard English as expansive and inclusive, as being able to accommodate and include their culture and dialect" (3). By far the main importance of that pedagogical method for students remains its noted ability to avoid the negative "emotional and racial effects" of code-switching (that is, of essentially segregating home and privileged language, entirely switching codes to use each in its own setting) (5). Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of code-meshing remains that simple racism has much greater effects on students' prospects than whatever dialect they learn to use (5). In terms of the argument here, we can say that code-switching not only puts all the burden of communication on less empowered writers and speakers but also—and perhaps partly for those reasons—causes significant personal and social harm. So we can start with a practice of code-meshing as a helpful way to work with speakers and writers of disfavored dialects. But while code-meshing can clearly help such students, perhaps it can do a great deal more for a broader range of students. Teachers just have to find a way past the problem that most students, and by far most teachers, have no immediately obvious alternate codes of their own to mesh.

A. Suresh Canagarajah's Introduction to *Literacy as Translingual Practice* illustrates (among a great many other useful things) why teachers might be able to start working with more varied and translingual styles and voices even before having generated a perfected body of theory and practice for crosscultural codemeshing. As Canagarajah

explains, schools have been complicit so far in artificially sustaining monolingual practices, doing much to create and sustain an atmosphere in which such practices become artificially disempowering. Yet in the rest of our lives (think, for example, of television advertisements), our larger culture willingly negotiates diverse cultural and linguistic practices. Normal school writing is actually the source and chief instance of the problem of monolingual power. It makes sense to shift that perspective in ways that code-meshing permits in part because classrooms aimed at producing Standard Written English genuinely create the problem that they have no ready means to solve. So, at the very least, we can apply the first rule of filling holes: first, stop digging them; stop insisting on Standard Written English. Canagarajah's collection as a whole offers bountiful examples of responsible alternatives.

Even teachers ready for that first step will rightly have other anxieties in going any farther with translingual practices, of course. What do teachers do about students whose "home" languages seem to correspond closely with privileged dialects? First, as Elbow explains, that concern partly ignores the important "vernacular" dimension of spoken language, something that writers have always drawn upon for effective style. As Elbow declares, "In short, *'correct writing' is no one's mother tongue*" (4). Or, as he later puts it in what he calls its "negative form," "[O]ur culture of literacy functions as though it were a plot against the spoken voice, the human body, vernacular language, and those without privilege" (6-7). As he ultimately concludes "it takes strong force (usually political, sometimes military) to squash the inevitable human linguistic tendency toward divergence" (372). As a result, it becomes entirely possible to position all students as having suppressed voices to explore—either their own, internalized ones or ones that they hear around them. Furthermore, we can and should work with a broad range of dialects for practical reasons with widespread benefits. Such work should help all students improve stylistic flexibility and control, and so the perceived value of their writing. And everybody has at least some variation from the imagined norm available as a starting place for that exploration.

Meanwhile, if less privileged students are ever to have true rights to their home languages, we will first have to expose a broader range of students to reading, working with, and understanding a broader range of Englishes and dialects. And in turn, helping more students become comfortable with writing and reading a wider range of home languages should enhance communication generally. Thus, it should be that writing teachers could work out how to make aggressive use of code-meshing and vernacular writing to expand the range of students' writing and reading style.

Such approaches raise great risks, of course—naïve cultural appropriation, or a simplistic essentializing of other voices, among others. Nevertheless, there could be much to gain from widespread use of code-meshing in writing classes, for all students. After all, as Young writes in the "Coda" to *Other People's English*, "[W]e also hope this book will serve as a framework for understanding language in ways that can help anyone reduce language prejudice and promote the power of language as opposed to the codes of power" (156). The most basic method for expanding code-meshing into a broader practice would entail having all students identify the ways in which, as Elbow contends, all of us have at least some differences to negotiate with some mythic, idealized standard form of English. I can also imagine that it serves the larger purposes of code-meshing

well if we mess up the power relations among codes, finding ways to ask students with more privileged voices to engage seriously with less privileged dialects, and holding them (and ourselves) accountable for understanding that work responsibly. Again, that is a kind of work that could pay large cultural and economic benefits, generating more skilled reading of less privileged dialects by larger audiences, in turn breaking down the artificial cultural dominance of privileged dialects. Meanwhile, it may also be effective and valuable style work for all students who engage with it.

Thus, writing teachers from more privileged backgrounds (that is, for related structural reasons, by far most college writing teachers) might best start with modified imitation exercises, where the quality of the result could be referenced to a specific example. That method could avoid the dangerous problem of invoking thinly imagined stereotypes. And it might well be prudent in our early going to focus on voices from far corners of English dialect rather than from across the street, for related reasons. One might easily extend Elbow's own approach to helping students "mesh" their own vernacular into languages of power with playful imitation of dialects near and far, simply to get a sense of how other styles feel and what difference they make. Elbow suggests using Dohra Ahmed's anthology *Rotten English*, a collection of culturally disfavored (but clearly powerful) voices, for other purposes; but it would also seem like a natural source for useful imitation exercises of this kind. And since that collection brings in a variety of English dialects from around the world, the language would be unfamiliar and broadening for most of our students across class lines.

My own experience with this approach has not risen to the point of producing reliable evidence, but it offers grounds to hope that this approach has prospects worth further and broader exploration. In much earlier, much more poorly grounded attempts at cross-cultural stylistic imitation, I found that privileged students erred too often in the direction of seeing dialect as deficiency, focusing their attempts at imitation on exaggerating errors and limited, stereotypical "moves." But lately I have been asking students to start by imitating dialects with which they had no familiarity, and to base imitations closely on model texts. I have found an interesting contrary tendency when students err: they now mainly "correct" error, regularizing the dialect in more of a true meshing with their own vision of a standardized language. Their efforts thus open up interesting conversations about the nature of code-meshing, as well as the actual variety of their different interpretations of how that standardized language works. But even more encouraging has been the extent to which students more often fully engage with an unfamiliar dialect in their imitations once we have explored its nature together a bit. Meanwhile, translative imitation—seeking to discuss some incident or idea that has genuine (even if often playful) connections with the content and ideas in the original—deepens students' understanding of the text itself with which they are engaging. I have been encouraged to do more of this work—and will.

But perhaps most significantly, these experiences have alerted me to my own deficiencies in preparation for this kind of work—deficiencies born of a career spent focusing on other matters of more concern within the current paradigm of writing. Looking to the future, the linguistic skills and cultural sensitivity needed to manage code-meshing from all directions probably should become more prominently demanded of those who claim to have expert preparation as writing teachers. That is, ultimately any

revolution must be disruptive, must entail some destructive energy, must leave some current experts behind. But a large-scale turn toward the practices of rhetorical listening and code-meshing, already in swing, would seem to have great potential for helping writing teachers re-tool on the fly, becoming also the right kind of people to develop the new paradigm. I say this well aware of the phenomenon that Thomas Kuhn documents—the ways in which revolutions tend ultimately to entirely supplant old paradigms, with adherents to the old ways never changing their minds but simply dying off. I have higher hopes for people who study all these matters of cultural change so assiduously; but if that's the way it must be here as well, better to get started at it sooner, so that at least we can stop generating further generations of those devoted to the old paradigm.

Epilogue: The Author's Pragmatic Ideology

I add here one final point that I wish were not necessary, but that probably is. And I add it last not as a “gotcha” for those who might have read this entire argument differently, but because it really should, structurally, be nothing more than an afterthought. The fundamental intention of this argument is to improve the means by which writing accomplishes its ends—defining those ends broadly only to include every human motivation for writing. I do not start with any assumption that linguistic diversity is good in and of itself, or that being inclusive is good in and of itself, or even that patriarchy is bad in and of itself. I simply find it self-evident that broadening the range of writing most people can read is a surer, quicker, cheaper, more efficient, and more productive path to better communication compared to attempting to regularize all language use in narrowly constricted ways. Popular culture offers abundant evidence that people generally agree. Indeed, the prevalence of varied discourse in most of life should serve to put the burden of proof on those who contend otherwise. Writing classes have labored for too long under an absurd assumption that regularization is the better approach, even despite the prominent evidence that grammar instruction—the most obvious and general outcome of that assumption—has had such dismal record of performance. We should, of course, welcome any genuine evidence to the contrary; but as in the grammar debates, it would be wise not to hold our breath while we wait.

For now, I will rest my case on a simple thought experiment. Let us posit two parties to a communication. The first is fluent in a non-standard dialect but has not yet learned Standard Written English. The second knows Standard Written English well, but has not yet learned the other dialect. What do we suppose would be the most efficient means by which we could ensure that these two parties understand each other very fully? As soon as we put aside any thought of privileging Standard Written English, the answer clearly appears: help them read each other effectively. That pragmatic end is my only agenda in this argument. The rest simply serves that end and, of course, many others.

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