

“I have understanding as well as you”: Supporting the language and learning needs of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds

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The Australian Federal Government’s recent commitment to increasing the numbers of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in higher education will have a particular impact on the academic language and learning professional, who is at the front line in providing learning support for such students. The presence of working-class students at the university can be a powerful challenge to the unspoken assumptions that surround academic discourse, and raises a number of pressing ethical as well as practical issues. This paper reviews some of the literature on the specific needs of students from low SES backgrounds, with a focus on language and learning support. It presents a range of strategies for working with these learners to achieve the specific literacies associated with academic discourse, while recognising and drawing on the knowledge and understandings they bring to the academy.

Key Words: low SES students, academic discourse, language and learning.

1. Introduction

In Thomas Hardy’s 1895 novel, *Jude the Obscure*, a young orphan boy from a village in southern England decides that he wants to go to university. Because he has to earn his keep, he is not able to attend school, and goes to night classes only sporadically. But he manages to get hold of some old Greek and Latin grammars and spends whatever time he has left over from work in solitary study, determined to master these ancient languages and thus earn himself an entrée to Christminster, “the palace of the learned” (p. 133). Nobody supports him in his endeavours. All he hears on every side is that places like Christminster (a thinly disguised Oxford) are out of his reach: “Such places be not for such as you—only for them with plenty o’ money” (p. 133). His peers deride him as “very stuck-up, and always reading” (p. 53). Yet he is not to be deterred. Christminster is to him a “romance in stone” (p. 44), and he has a semi-mystical belief that if he could just get himself to the holy city, he would become a scholar by the sheer power of propinquity.

It’s a hard road for a country boy with no connections, no formal education and no money. But eventually, after a hiccup or two, he makes it to Christminster. He has no idea how to go about applying to one of the colleges, or what qualifications he needs, or how much it might cost. So he continues to work as a stone-mason by day and toils away at his books at night. Soon, he begins to fear that he is not making progress: “So fatigued was he sometimes after his day’s work that he could not maintain the critical attention necessary for thorough application” (p. 133). At last he writes to the heads of five colleges, explaining his situation and asking for their advice. Four do not reply; the fifth advises him curtly to “[remain] in your own sphere and

[stick] to your trade” (p. 137). It is a terrible blow to Jude, a “hard slap after ten years of labour” (p. 138). He goes out to get drunk, but ends up wandering around the city, fuming and seething. Finally, he gets out his workman’s chalk and scrawls some defiant Biblical graffiti on a college wall: “I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not such things as these?” (Job xii. 3; p. 139).

Hardy’s portrait of a working-class person’s experience of an exclusive university system is more than a hundred years old, yet it bears some uncanny similarities to such experiences today, both in the UK and in Australia. Research shows that potential students from working-class backgrounds experience a disabling mismatch between their social world and that of academe; that they can face overwhelming obstacles in getting the kind of education they need to qualify for entry to elite universities; that they often don’t know how to get into university, how much it will cost them, nor how the applications game is played; and that when they do get to university, they are hampered by a need to work long hours to support themselves (see, for example, Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Leathwood & Hayton, 2002; Tonks & Farr, 2003; Bessant, 2007). Further, today’s academics may be almost as likely as Jude’s cloistered dons to fail to recognise that working-class students have their own knowledge and skills, and their own literacies and language, and that these have the potential to enrich and ultimately transform the university. Perhaps it is little wonder, then, that the efforts of successive Australian and UK governments to improve access to and participation in higher education by people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds have been singularly unsuccessful over the past two decades. Nevertheless, the Australian government, at least, has renewed its commitment to increasing the number of students of low SES in higher education, pledging to lift the intake from the current level of around 16% to 20% by 2020 (Slattery, 2009). This projected increase will have a particular impact on the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) profession. While it is no longer necessary to read Latin and ancient Greek to attend university, there are still specialist discourses to learn and advanced literacies to navigate, and the research indicates that in this, students of low SES backgrounds are at a disadvantage. This paper looks first at the recent changes in the higher education system in the US, the UK and Australia as they relate to the numbers of working-class students at university. It then considers the political and ethical issues surrounding the presence of these students in institutions that have historically excluded them. Finally, it seeks to identify from the literature strategies that ALL professionals may find useful in working with and supporting working-class students, particularly those based on a recognition of the claim that, in Jude’s words, “I have understanding as well as you”.

2. People from low SES backgrounds and the university

Since the 1990s, there have been big increases in the numbers of students attending universities in both the UK and Australia, with similar increases evident in the US since the 1960s. Yet despite specific attempts to target people from lower SES backgrounds, the great majority of students are still drawn from the higher echelons of society: that is, from families of high SES, the professional and managerial classes. According to Tonks and Farr (2003), in the UK higher education system, “the absolute growth in numbers largely benefited those social classes which have always enjoyed disproportionately high levels of representation” (p. 28). They point out that while access for those in the lowest socio-economic group rose from 6% to 12% between 1991 and 1996, it reached nearly 80% for those in the highest socio-economic group (p. 28). Neither overall numbers nor access for people from low SES backgrounds changed significantly during the Blair Government, despite concerted efforts to improve equity and access (Lunt, 2008). Similarly, in Australia, there has been no improvement in the participation of students of low SES backgrounds in higher education since 1991 (O’Connor & Moodie, 2008; Gale 2009). Indeed, the recent review of Australian higher education by Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, and Scales (2008) states that “A student from a high socio-economic background is about three times more likely to attend university than a student from a low socio-economic background” (p. 30). The proportion of people of low SES attending university is nowhere near their proportion in the population, which is measured at 25% (Bradley et al., 2008).

There are also significant differences in the type of higher education accessed by people from different socio-economic backgrounds. In the UK, for instance, so-called “elite institutions” like Oxford and Cambridge still draw 80% of their students from the managerial and professional class (Tonks & Farr, 2003, p. 26), while working-class students are likely to study at “the poorer and lower status post-1992 universities” (Leathwood & Hayton, 2002, p. 149). Leathwood and Hayton note that at such institutions, fewer resources have led to “larger class sizes, fewer tutors, poorer library facilities, and lower teaching quality assessments” (p. 149). They suggest that as a result, many working-class people see themselves as being offered only a cheap imitation of a university education, regarding the institutions that are open to them as “‘crap universities’, as inferior to ‘real’ higher education” (p. 149). Not surprisingly, they are likely to question the value of such an education; and, indeed, Leathwood and Hayton affirm that in terms of earnings after graduation, working-class graduates benefit less from their education than middle-class graduates (p. 147). Figures from the US suggest a similar dearth of students from low SES backgrounds attending elite higher education institutions (Bowen, 2004).

Though the Australian higher education system is considerably smaller than the UK and US systems, there is some evidence of a similar divide between “real” education and the kind of education available to the working-class. Bradley et al. (2008) point out that the so-called “Group of Eight” – the long-established, high-prestige urban universities – have “the lowest enrolment of low socio-economic status students” (p. 33), with five of the eight enrolling fewer than 10% – in some cases significantly fewer (p. 34). The newer universities, not surprisingly, have the highest proportion. What this suggests is that in the main, the elite institutions are, like Hardy’s Christminster, still “only for them with plenty o’ money”.

The reasons for the inability of the higher education system as a whole to attract students from low SES backgrounds are multiple and diverse, and largely beyond the scope of this paper. But the question of what happens to those students of low SES who do attend university is one that directly concerns ALL professionals. According to Bradley et al. (2008), participation rates (which reflect not just levels of enrolment but also attrition and graduation) are very close to access rates for students of low SES in Australian universities. In other words, once these students arrive at university, they perform as well as students from other backgrounds: “the success rate (or tendency to pass their year’s subjects) of low socio-economic status students is 97 per cent of the pass rates of their medium and high socio-economic status peers” (p. 30). This finding is not consistent, however, with research on students of low SES backgrounds in the US and the UK. For example, Jetten et al. (2008) draw on research from the Higher Education Funding Council in the UK to show that students from lower SES backgrounds “appear to be more likely than students from relatively higher SES backgrounds to drop out without completing their degree” (p. 876), while Archer (2003) notes that working-class groups have “generally lower levels of attainment and rates of participation in post-compulsory education” (p. 6). In the US context, Bowen (2004) notes that “national results ... show decidedly below-average graduation rates for students from low-income families” (p. 17), while Martinez, Sher, Krull, and Wood (2009) identify higher attrition and lower grade-point averages for students whose parents did not go to college.

The discrepancy between the Australian and the international research on this issue may be related to the way SES is measured. In Australia, it has traditionally been determined by place of residence, with geographical areas (postcodes) classified according to three socio-economic groupings (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008, pp. 15-19; Bradley et al., 2008, pp. 38-39). This method has been widely criticised, and there is concern that it may have led to an under-estimation of the degree to which people from low SES backgrounds are under-represented in higher education. If the criteria for SES are broadened to include parental occupation and education levels (traditional markers of social class), even the Australian evidence seems to point to ongoing disadvantage for university students from low SES backgrounds. Win and Miller (2005), for instance, in a large study of first-year students at the University of Western Australia, found that while the economic resources of a student’s family did not have an impact on the student’s performance, the occupation and level of education of the student’s parents did. They concluded that “students from favourable family backgrounds ...

appear to do better in their university studies, even after controlling for the TER” (p. 10). Similarly, Marks’ (2007) analysis of data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth concluded that while a student’s SES background “does not negatively affect their chances of completing the course”, the educational level of their parents does. Specifically, “Students whose parents had not completed secondary school had the lowest expected completion rate for any course (72%)” (p. 2). Even within the Bradley Report, there is a focus on issues that impede the progress of such students, including poverty and lack of academic preparedness (pp. 50, 42). Poverty is a major issue for Australian students, as Bessant (2007) points out, arguing that financial hardship has a dramatic impact on students’ efficacy, their ability to academically integrate, and their likelihood of dropping out. In terms of academic preparedness, Bradley et al. (2008) note that low SES students “are heavy users of academic and personal support services provided by universities, such as learning and language skill development; counselling; and financial services” (p. 42). For this reason, they argue that low SES students are more expensive to fund than other students, and that extra resources should be provided for them (p. 42).

Regardless of how SES is defined, then – and it is a necessarily unstable concept (Archer, 2003, p. 20) – it seems to be widely acknowledged that students of low SES face more challenges at university than other students. Indeed, social class has an enormous influence on the shape of a person’s life from early childhood. In *Outliers: The story of success*, Gladwell (2008) describes a longitudinal study of people with “genius” IQs conducted by Lewis Terman in California. Through rigorous and extensive testing, Terman identified children with an average IQ of 140 (some were as high as 200) and tracked them throughout their lives. Gladwell writes that Terman was convinced that the children’s brilliant IQs would ensure they were extraordinarily successful. What he found, however, was that over a lifetime the group divided into three categories, ranging from very successful to unsuccessful. Those who were most successful “overwhelmingly came from the middle and the upper class” (p. 111), while those who were least successful “were from the other side of the tracks” (p. 112), from families with low income and/or low education levels. In fact, he writes, “almost *none* of the genius children from the lowest social and economic class ended up making a name for themselves” (p. 112). Gladwell’s point is that the things middle- and upper-class children gain from their class and family background give them an advantage when it comes to educational and professional opportunities. One of those things, arguably, is a familiarity with academic discourse.

3. The politics of language

It’s a truism to say that a university education requires a relatively high level of proficiency with language. This extends beyond literacy (in the simple sense of being able to read and write) to the specific modes of language use known as academic discourse. Even those students who are not studying language-based courses are judged on their competence with this discourse. As Binkley and Smith (2006) put it, “upper-division standing in higher education is usually determined by composition skills” – which they see as encapsulating “the rules and methods dictated by Western forms of knowledge” (p. 4). In other words, the better you are at using academic discourse, the more successful you are likely to be at university. Many students struggle with this discourse; in the words of one composition teacher, “the rhetorical standard practiced in college” is difficult to acquire “for anyone” (Corkery, 2009, p. 2). But, as Bourdieu, Passeron, and Saint Martin (1994) point out, all students are not equal “in respect of the demands made by academic language” (p. 9). Students from low SES backgrounds are more likely than other students to find academic discourse remote and unfamiliar.

One of the main reasons for this is that, in the terms of Bourdieu et al. (1994), academic discourse is allied with the language of cultural privilege. They argue that a person’s language is “the most active and elusive part of the cultural heritage which each individual owes to his background” (p. 9). In other words, our use of language is grounded in our family and social circumstances. Furthermore, when we learn to use language, we are learning not just words and syntax, but values, attitudes and perspectives, what Bourdieu et al. refer to as “a system of transposable mental dispositions” which “go hand in hand with values which dominate the whole of our experience and, in particular, with a vision of society and of culture” (p. 8). The

values, experience and “vision” of children from privileged backgrounds are more likely to be congruent with academic discourse than those of children from other backgrounds. Working-class students, in particular, are likely to feel that there is a big gap between their language use (and the world view it underwrites) and that of formal education. The result can be a strong sense of disconnect:

The divorce between the language of the family and the language of school only serves to reinforce the feeling that the education system belongs to another world, and that what teachers have to say has nothing to do with daily life because it is spoken in a language which makes it unreal. (Bourdieu et al., 1994, p. 9)

Lack of familiarity with the language of the academy is thus transformed into lack of interest in the concerns of the academic world, which seem obscure and irrelevant. Those who persevere do so only by accepting “a sense of dualism or [living] in a resigned submission to being excluded” (Bourdieu et al., 1994, p. 9).

Bourdieu and his colleagues base their analysis of the relationship between class and academic discourse on a study of students at French universities in the early 1960s. More than forty years later, however, their ideas continue to inform the work of teachers and theorists of writing and composition in universities in the West. It seems to be widely accepted that, as Rose (2005) puts it, “language varieties are always socially constructed” (p. 1), and that “knowledge and language use are situational” (p. 4). In the US, in particular, such an analysis is given more urgency by racial differences in language use. The presence of distinctive English vernaculars, such as Black English and Hispanic English, have led those concerned with the teaching of writing in universities to explicitly affirm that all uses of language (dialects) are culturally specific, and to challenge the idea that, in Rose’s words, “standard English represents the correct language and ... other forms [are] incorrect versions of it” (p. 1). According to this view,

the prestige of Standard English derives exclusively from the social status of its speakers and has no relationship to linguistic or syntactic complexity or regularity. Formal definitions of good writing that privilege one dialect over another only express the power of dominant groups to name and define the terms of social life. (Bruch & Marback, 1997, p. 3)

Given this, it seems self-evident that, in the words of a 1974 manifesto by US teachers of composition, students have a “right to their own language” (Bruch & Marback, 1997). Yet acknowledging this right and instituting it in the classroom are two different things. The assumption of the 1974 document is that students still need to learn so-called “standard English” – the language of power within the academy, or what another American academic, Young (2004), calls “white English vernacular”. For Bruch and Marback, however, this leaves teachers and students in the impossible position of having to choose between “teacher appreciation of non-privileged dialects” on the one hand, and “student assimilation to privileged dialects” on the other (p. 2). For them, teaching students privileged dialects at university only reinforces the power of such dialects – and the students’ sense of alienation from the society that is organised around them. They question whether it is really possible for teachers to affirm students’ rights to their own dialect while simultaneously insisting they learn another one. It is a question echoed by Young, who writes that no matter how sensitively it is done, teaching black students to use “[Black English Vernacular] at home and in black communities and [White English Vernacular] in school” inevitably communicates the message “that their language and identities are not welcome in school” (pp. 704-705). Not only that, but being “bidialectical” – that is, learning to speak two dialects – requires black students to perform linguistic and psychological manoeuvres that are not required of white students. They are expected to enact what Keith Gilyard (cited in Young, 2004) calls “enforced educational schizophrenia” (p. 705). As Young (2004) explains, “black students are forced to see themselves as embodying two different racial, linguistic, and cultural identities” (p. 705).

This dilemma – whether to affirm students’ own dialects or teach them to use the dominant one – is at the heart of the work of the ALL advisor who, whether working with students of diverse

racial backgrounds or diverse class backgrounds or both (and often students of low SES are also from racial minorities), is enjoined to mediate the discourses of the university and facilitate students' acquisition not only of literacy but of the dominant discourses of both the university and society. On the one hand, we have an ethical imperative to recognise, validate and, ideally, learn from the literacies these students bring with them. They have the capacity to expand and enrich the academy's ways of speaking, thinking and writing by bringing new discourses, new forms of knowledge and fresh ways of being into the mix. On the other hand, if we do not teach them the dominant discourses of the academy, there is a very good chance the academy will never recognise or acknowledge what they have to offer. As Elbow (1991) puts it, "It's no good just saying, 'Learn to write what's comfy for you, kiddies,' if that puts them behind the eight-ball in their college careers" (p. 135). He adds that this is even more important for students from low SES backgrounds: "Not to help them with academic discourse is simply to leave a power vacuum and thereby reward privileged students who have already learned academic discourse [or the propensity for it] at home or in school" (p. 135).

In writing of her work with Indigenous students at Curtin University in WA, Greville (1998) identifies a similar dilemma. The curriculum with which she was working did not "assume a common set of skills, knowledge and assumptions provided by years of European education" and sought to capitalise on the strengths of Indigenous literacies. The program drew on "oral communication – speaking and listening – along with graphic skills ... for teaching, learning and assessment" (p. 58). For the teachers, an important aim of the program was "to find ways to effectively and critically engage with reading and writing ... without compromising [the students'] Indigenous identity and cultural capital" (p. 58). Yet when they surveyed students in the program, they found that the majority wanted more focus on developing "their skills in print literacy" (p. 58). They felt they needed access to the "literate practices of organisations and government" in their jobs and in the wider community (p. 58). The challenge for Greville and her colleagues, then, was to find a way to teach what she calls (drawing on Scollon & Scollon, 1981) "essayist literacy" (p. 61) without devaluing or replacing Indigenous literacies.

In this situation, students were specifically asking to be taught the types of literacy that are dominant in the wider culture because they recognised this as a source of power. As Barnett (2000) puts it in the context of African-Americans, "If the only route to economic and social power was through the language of the majority, this language would have been looked on by many who did not speak it as necessary, despite the individual and community identities that may have been compromised if the home language were to be lost" (p. 26). There is no doubt that "essayist literacy" is enormously powerful, not just in higher education, but throughout Western culture. As Greville (1998) writes,

The structure and grammar of essayist literacy underwrite the practise of the administrative and bureaucratic domains. ... It is the preferred means of formal communication in public texts in Western institutional settings and effective use of this particular literacy is a key to operate within and communicate with these institutions. (p. 61)

Yet children from relatively affluent families are likely to have much greater exposure to this mode of literacy from their earliest years, both at school and at home, than children from less affluent families. Thus, as Greville explains, "When Indigenous students come to these discourses they often fear losing their own 'voice'" (p. 61).

From Bruch and Marbank's (1997) perspective, this brings us back to the following difficult bind: to teach students the dominant discourse is to reinforce an unjust social system and perpetuate the cultural message that some discourses are more valid than others; but not to teach it is to put certain forms of power within society as it is currently constituted out of reach of those who very much need that power. The literature shows a range of different responses to that dilemma. At one extreme are those who argue, like Rice (2008), that there should be no compromise. Rice's position is that instead of accommodating the requirements of a marketised education system, teachers of composition should instead undermine and ultimately seek to overthrow that system. At the other extreme are those who reject outright the idea that there is any potential injustice, implicit or not, in the teaching of academic languages and literacies.

Bloom (1997) is a good example of this approach, arguing that while it is evident that what universities teach in rhetoric and composition classes are the values of the “intellectual class” and the “middle class” in the US, these values are worth promulgating. She emphasises that as teachers, “We Want Our Students to Share Our Class Values”, and is untroubled by any sense that these values may cement class privilege and perpetuate inequities. By far the most common approach, however, to the dilemma outlined above falls somewhere in between these two extremes. This approach is based on an understanding, first, that the value of different forms of literacy is socially determined, rather than an immutable given, and second, that it is possible to meet the needs of students without blindly reinforcing messages of cultural inferiority or reinscribing unjust power relations. In the final section of this paper, I want to examine some of the strategies suggested in the literature for doing just this.

4. Strategies for supporting students of low SES

Common to much of the literature on working with students of low SES on academic literacies seems to be the determination to “teach the questions”. The problem of dominant and subordinate discourses cannot be resolved in any simple way. But it is possible, and, indeed, desirable, to let students in on this dilemma. Barnett (2000), for example, writes of how he seeks in the classroom to “lead students through my own confusion at discovering that the grammar and language I had always considered simply ‘correct’ in an absolute, ahistorical kind of way was in fact a complicated signifier of power” (p. 33). Barnett is speaking specifically about race, but his insights apply equally well to class, especially if the teacher and the students do not share the same socio-economic background. Rather than struggle with the problem of simultaneously empowering and disempowering students by teaching them the dominant discourse, he suggests sharing the contradictions and confusion with the students and inviting them to construct “a narrative about the relationships between discourse and identity” (p. 34).

Greville (1998) suggests something similar. She argues that in teaching essayist literacy to Indigenous students, it is important to present it as a specific mode of “whitefella” discourse, with value in specific contexts, rather than as the “right” or “best” way to think and write (p. 62). In other words, she advises teachers to “*Be explicit about the function and purpose of different literate practices*” (p. 62, emphasis in original). She also emphasises the need to “value student ideas and voice” in order to “make the space for students to position themselves as Indigenous readers and writers” (p. 63). In this, she comes close to the US concept of “bidialecticism” or “code switching”.

The idea of code switching comes from Lisa Delpit, who argued in relation to black students in the US that students should not be taught “to passively adopt an alternate code. They must be encouraged to understand the value of the code they already possess as well as to understand the power realities in this country” (cited in Corkery, 2009, p. 9). Thus students learn the “new” code associated with academic writing, but do not abandon the code associated with their social background. They simply switch between the codes as required, depending on the context, thus becoming effective communicators in a greater range of situations. Corkery develops this position further by arguing that students should be taught to analyse and reflect on their existing rhetorical styles to identify their origins, strengths and weaknesses in different contexts. This will help them to see which of the strategies they have learned from their social environment they can adapt and draw on, and which will be obstacles in learning academic discourse. In a similar vein, Young (2004) suggests that black students be encouraged to use both codes – their “home” language and that of academe – in the school environment, an important step in having both codes acknowledged as “equal in terms of social prestige” (p. 706). An important part of this for him, however, is the recognition that the codes are not in fact “radically different”, that each can contribute to the other (p. 706). He suggests, for example, that rhetorical strategies used in Black English Vernacular could be usefully adopted in academic writing. The implications of Young’s argument if applied to class are quite radical: it would suggest that we take seriously the idea that people of working-class backgrounds have language and literacy strategies from which academic discourse could benefit.

Elbow (1991) propounds a related approach, suggesting that students be encouraged to use the modes of language most familiar to them when doing academic work, at least initially. This involves separating out some of the content of academic discourse from the language, enabling students to grapple with “the demanding intellectual tasks of clarifying claims and giving reasons and so forth” in their own vernacular (p. 149). This has the secondary benefit, he argues, of allowing students to distinguish between the intellectual work that is implied by academic language and the use of academic language itself. He notes that many students “get seduced or preoccupied with that surface dimension [of the vocabulary and style of academic language] and learn only to mimic it while still failing to engage fully [with] the intellectual task” (p. 149). This is a point also made by Bourdieu et al. (1994), who write of how students can focus on “reproducing” the academic discourse they hear at university instead of doing the academic work required: “Through a kind of incantatory or sacrificial rite, they try to call up and reinstate the tropes, schemas or words which to them distinguish professorial language” (p. 4). In other words, they simply throw the key words into their sentences willy-nilly, in the hope that their mere presence will work the magic that will turn random thoughts into something that looks and sounds like the real thing. This, indeed, is a danger of teaching academic discourse uncritically, without making the attempt to bridge the gap between the student’s own social discourse and the seemingly unreal discourse of academe. Failure to make this connection can lead, as Jan Swearingen (cited in Binkley & Smith, 2006) puts it, to teaching students simply “to write acceptable lies in standard English” (p. 5 of 10). Elbow’s suggestion is an attempt to get the language out of the way so that students can engage with the underlying cognitive processes: “students can do academic work even in street language – and indeed using the vernacular helps show whether the student is doing real intellectual work or just using academic jive” (p. 149). For him, this is crucial to presenting academic discourse as simply one “part of a larger exploration of various voices and styles” (p. 153), and may lead to rejuvenating changes in academic discourse itself.

Newman’s (2003) discussion of Hispanic students from the so-called borderlands in the US raises further potential teaching strategies relevant to both class and race. She defines these students as having their own specific literacy problems: having grown up with Spanish-speaking parents but attending English-speaking schools, they “acquire neither English nor Spanish at a level of competence that could classify them as literate in either language” (p. 46). She writes that, “The errors seen in the writing of borderlands students are so numerous that they can easily overwhelm a tutor: it is easy to conclude – erroneously – that such writers know nothing about English” (p. 58). This is not to say that they are not competent users of language in their own contexts; but they have particular problems with the reading and writing requirements of a college education.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that working-class students in Australia sometimes have similarly problematic levels of literacy; they are able to read and write well enough to function in society, but struggle with the reading and writing tasks assigned at university, not only at the level of academic discourse but also at the level of simple literacy: comprehending what they read and producing readable text. Newman’s solution in working with borderlands students is to pay attention to the student’s own explanation of their errors in order to understand why they write in ways that may seem at first glance to be simply incomprehensible. She explains, for instance, that many students make errors in English as a result of applying a linguistic rule or structure that would make sense in Spanish. Understanding the reasons behind the language structures students choose provides a starting point for discussing, analysing and critiquing them.

Newman (2003) also emphasises the importance of not focusing exclusively on errors of language use and grammar but giving students feedback on other elements of their writing, such as their argument or development of ideas. This point is also made by Greville (1998), who learned in interviews with students that the feedback they found most helpful was feedback that “engaged with their ideas – what they wanted to say – and not just spelling and punctuation” (p. 62). She adds that it took time for students to “accept that a staff member ... [was] suggesting changes to their writing to help them be powerful communicators, and not simply to show them

where they had ‘gone wrong’” (p. 62). This difference of emphasis, however, was crucial in gaining their trust.

This orientation – a focus on helping students to become powerful communicators rather than on identifying their writing errors – seems to be vital in working with students with low levels of formal literacy. In this, as Newman (2003) argues, academics in the disciplines are as important as those in writing centres. She found that her students’ professors often had an exclusive focus on errors when marking student assignments, identifying every grammatical mistake but failing to comment on the ideas, structure or approach. The lack of feedback, and in particular the failure to indicate what students were doing well in addition to what they were doing badly, was particularly demotivating for students. In this context, Newman suggests that the writing centre – the ALL centre in Australian terms – has an important role to play in mediating the students’ interactions with their teachers.

Rustick (2007) raises the related problem of how to help students improve their writing at a technical level when they have no formal knowledge of grammar. She refers to the current debate in the US over whether or not to teach formal grammar, a debate fuelled, she suggests, by the question: “How do we increase students’ editing skills and sentence control without traditional grammar?” (p. 45). The benefit of knowing formal grammar is that it acts as a metalanguage that students and teachers can use to analyse their writing and describe and explain errors. Without that metalanguage, it is difficult to talk about problems in language use – or even to debate the concept of error and its essentially social nature. But in both Australia and the US, most students are not taught grammar in primary or secondary school, and so that metalanguage is largely absent when students get to university.

Direct instruction in grammar in the schoolroom was abandoned, in Australia, at least, because many decades of research showed that teaching grammar did not improve writing competence (Snyder, 2008). Those who had studied grammar were able to pass tests on grammar rules, but were no better as writers than those who had not studied it. In other words, learning how language works in the abstract does not help people learn how to use it. Instead, the conventional wisdom has been, students learn to write effectively (and grammatically) by immersing themselves in written text. They learn to write, that is, by reading and writing. Through repeated exposure to written text, the underlying structures of language are introduced and reinforced and quickly become second-nature. The obvious problem with this approach, however, is that it only works if children do a lot of reading and writing, and as Snell’s (2008) analysis of literacy figures in the US shows, rates of literary reading (that is, reading of any kind of fiction, poetry or drama) are falling fast. While literary reading is not the only form of reading that may help students learn the structures of language, it does have a role to play. Snell argues that literary reading rates are linked with rates of reading proficiency, which are also dramatically declining in the US. Moreover, there is an obvious class dimension to these falls. According to Snell, literary reading rates are lowest among people from the lowest income group, with about 30% doing some form of literary reading, while they are highest among those from the highest income group, at about 61% (p. 30). Snell concludes that it is “reasonable to suggest that the lower the income and education levels, the lower the literary reading rates and the lower the ability or inclination of students to engage academically or socially” (p. 31). Though Australia does not have comparable figures on reading proficiency or literary reading rates, it seems likely that we are experiencing similar falls in both. The implications for a system of literacy based on immersion in written text are evident, and are brought home with peculiar strength to the ALL professional who works with students having technical problems with their writing. These students have failed to learn the structures of written English through reading, often because they don’t have a family or social culture that supports literary reading. But they also have no knowledge of grammar, a metalanguage which would enable them to identify and correct their own mistakes. In fact, such students are very likely to go into what Rustick (2007) calls the “comma coma” when any grammatical terms are mentioned: the “glazed stares and drooping eyelids” that seem to be an automatic response to any talk of punctuation or grammar.

Rustick's (2007) solution is, once again, to turn to the students themselves by drawing out their implicit knowledge of linguistic structures. Even students who are not confident readers and writers have a great depth of experience with the oral dimensions of language (speaking and listening), and much of what they know about oral forms of language can be applied or adapted to print forms. She suggests the use of grammar games to capitalise on these resources in a playful and effective way, and describes a number of classroom-based activities that involve "playing with sentence-length text, creating opportunities for students to discover the relationship between word functions and sentence boundaries without relying on grammatical terminology and rules" (p. 45). Being explicit about the differences between oral and print forms of literacy – in particular, the conventions that carry over and those that don't – is also helpful. If there is plenty of time, "immersing students in the target language through extensive reading" is also an effective strategy (p. 46). All too often, though, time is at a premium as students need immediate help in the context of pressing assignment deadlines.

Rustick (2007) also argues, drawing on Michael Long's concept of "focus on form", that direct grammar instruction can be usefully given when specific issues arise from students' reading and writing. In this way, the teaching of grammar is completely contextualised, offered only when directly relevant to the student's goals, and thus is more likely to be internalised. For students for whom "nature [sic] has arrived too late" – that is, those who have failed to acquire literacy skills experientially, through immersion and osmosis – more direct interventions may be appropriate: "explicit instruction, modelling, and opportunities to practice the appropriate constructions" (p. 58).

Finally, one of the most powerful and effective strategies for working with students from low SES backgrounds is simply, in McGlynn's (2009) words, to "pay attention". This means, first, listening to what students have to say about their experiences and, second, identifying what is working and what isn't at both an ALL and an institutional level. Listening to the voices of working-class students, even when they are not speaking in the traditional "languages" of the university, is the key to being able to identify points of connection and fruitful interchange. It enables us, as ALL professionals, to find ways to break down the "unreality" of academic discourse, but it also enables our students to teach us about the "reality" of theirs. Gale (2009) writes of the need to valorise "the epistemologies and ontologies of under-represented groups" (pp. 13-14), and speculates about some of the benefits that might flow from this. He suggests, among other things, that "low SES students' scepticism of official knowledge" might "help us move beyond the separation of practical knowledge from theoretical knowledge" (p. 13). The key to discovering such benefits is being genuinely open to our students' perspectives and experiences – as expressed in their own languages and discourses.

We also need to scrutinise our own efforts. McGlynn (2009) writes of the importance, in implementing any strategies to improve failure and attrition rates among students from minority and low-income backgrounds, of evaluating those strategies. We need to know what works and what doesn't, to be prepared to change strategies that have failed, to monitor attrition and graduation rates, and to apply all the thought and skill and experience and knowledge we can to the issue (p. 42). In other words, we need to be willing to do whatever it takes.

5. Conclusion

The disappointed Jude's scrawled insistence that "I have understanding as well as you" is still a crucial challenge to institutions of higher education. We need to be able to acknowledge that those who have traditionally been excluded from universities have knowledge that those institutions can learn from, that their presence can unsettle and ultimately transform higher education in powerful and positive ways. As Burke and Johnston (2004) point out in the US context, "structural change, social change and economic changes are required to forge education reforms creating an academic culture more sensitive and supportive of minority students" (p. 19). In the meantime, however, ALL professionals are at the front line in mediating between the university and working-class students, and vice versa. If we simply affirm the dominant discourse, we can end up reinforcing for these students their status as outsiders, and their sense

that the university has little to do with the real world. We can send them the message that who they are, what they know, how they think and speak are secondary or inferior and thus reinforce society-wide prejudice. Yet teaching students academic discourse can give marginalised people access to the mainstream. It can enable them to find a voice that will be heard, and a way to make their presence felt. It can also help a student in melt-down get through their next assignment – a concern that is often paramount for them. There is no ideal resolution to this dilemma, but the most powerful approaches seem to begin with a political stance that accepts, values and validates the knowledge students of low SES backgrounds bring and their many literacies. Effective strategies are based on drawing students into the debates, teaching them the questions, and encouraging them to find their own solutions. In our roles as ALL professionals, we need not only to share the knowledge we have but also to seek to learn from the knowledge of our students.

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