"The Stranger" in Communication: Race, Class, and Conflict in a Basic Writing Class

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In what ways does my Chinese background affect my teaching? I had never given this question much thought until I taught Composition Fundamentals, a remedial course for basic writers, last fall. My Chinese origin is not something I can or intend to disguise and, in the past six years of teaching writing at different institutions, my American students seem to have been willing to ignore the most obvious racial differences between them and me. However, things came to a surprising turn the day I entered the basic writing class. For the first time my ethnicity was accentuated in the classroom, by one of the African-American students who, seeing me entering the classroom and appearing behind the platform, remarked in suspicion, "You're the teacher?"

I had yet to realize the full significance of this blunt questioning two weeks later, when, at my invitation to comment on my ways of conducting this class, confrontation occurred between the African-American and white students. Half of the African-American students—five of them—voiced their dislike for the class, including close reading and analysis of written texts, my emphasis on the writing process, especially revising and editing, and in-class writing and group conferences. Three of the six white students, about one third of the class population, argued rather adamantly in defence of everything I had done. While half of the class was caught in the heat of the argument, the other half sat watching as onlookers, their faces expressionless and inscrutable. My ethnicity surfaced again, as one of the African-American students observed, trying to be fair perhaps, that she had learned a lot already despite the teacher being a Chinese and another added that the teacher would have done a better job without the "assistant teachers' help," referring to the white students. The atmosphere became explosive, and the tension between the African-American and white students, with me the teacher being the subject of controversy, alarmed me and for the first time forced me to face the issues of race in the teaching of writing.

My first reaction to the African-American students' criticism was that it was an indication of their racial prejudice, something that was irrelevant to my teaching and their learning, something that I should ignore rather than address
in class. Although I felt a little apologetic that my being a Chinese woman and teacher of English had somehow violated my students' expectations for a college English professor and caused them to feel uneasy, I also felt, at that moment, an impulse to counter their disobedience with an enforcement of my pedagogic authority. After all, I was the teacher, and I certainly knew better than my students what they needed to become better academic writers. I rehashed in my mind the six fifty-minute class periods in which I had interacted with these students to identify the causes of the manifested discontent: in the first period, the students wrote an in-class essay for me to decide who could skip the no-credit fundamental course. In the second period, after announcing that two students had passed the diagnostic writing and the rest had to remain, I noticed a couple of students clearly disappointed. I ignored them and discussed the goals of the course, the writing assignments, the textbook, and other requirements for the class. None of the students raised any objections. The sign of trouble seemed to appear in the third class period when we read and discussed two short pieces from the textbook, *The Heath Guide to College Writing*. The reading and discussion were supposed to help students generate ideas for their first writing assignment, but most students said very little and were reluctant to write in class, causing me to feel a little anxious. The fourth period was for prewriting and drafting, and I demonstrated how strategies such as brainstorming, outlining, and clustering could be used to generate and organize ideas in writing. In the fifth period, students were assigned to exchange ideas in groups, to get feedback on the topics they had chosen for the first writing assignment, and to produce a complete rough draft. A few students were not engaged in the group work because they did not know what to write about, and I emphasized students' responsibility as indirect criticism of them. The sixth period was for revision, and students were asked to read each other's complete rough draft and write written responses to their peers' papers. Several students told me that they did not know how to comment on others' papers. I assured them that they would learn through a lot of practice in this class.

The confrontation occurred in the seventh class period, when the papers were collected. Judging from most students' reluctance to participate actively in class activities, I had anticipated complaints about the amount of work they had to do, the unfamiliar pressure of group conferences, and my requirement that students turn in all their rough drafts, peer responses, and the final draft in a two-pocket folder to earn a grade for a writing assignment. However, having assumed that I had made the students understand the goals of the class, I was, at most, only prepared for some mild gestures of resistance. When half of the African-American students in my class spoke rather strongly against my ways of teaching, against the three white students who had been eager to participate in all class activities, and of my ethnicity, I was taken aback by the hostility that I had never experienced before. I was even more shocked by the total indifference of the rest of the class—six African-Americans and three whites—who looked so detached from the scene that their presence made the atmosphere all
the more disheartening. Remembering all the enthusiasm and good intentions I had brought into teaching this class, I felt an acute pain: these disenfranchised young people whom I had hoped to empower with academic literacy obviously felt differently.

In the moment of surprise and hurt, Patricia Bizzell’s professional wisdom sounded chillingly appealing. Believing that the teacher, once having the students’ best interests in mind, should justifiably use the teacher’s authority to ensure students’ obedience, Bizzell says,

In a writing class, this might mean that the teacher A can require the student B to try to argue in a certain way, to enter into a particular audience’s point of view, or to give credit to another writer’s reasoning, even if these activities seem very uncongenial to the student at the time. The student’s initial reluctance to undertake these activities is not allowed to prevent their practice, however, or to delay it while a lengthy process of persuasion is undertaken. The student agrees to attempt these activities while they still seem quite uncongenial, because the student has decided to trust A’s assurance that some good for the student ultimately will come out of it. (58; emphasis added)

If I were to follow Bizzell’s advice, I should be able to continue whatever I had been doing in class (uncongenial to some of the African-American students perhaps, but didn’t they come to college to receive an education?) and dismiss the incident as an inconsequential episode of certain students’ bias, immaturity, and reluctance to take pains in learning. However, the solution gave me little comfort, since I was well aware of the implications of the teacher’s institutional authority in the pedagogic context and the feelings of anger and frustration of African-American students that were responses to their history and experiences of being discriminated against in this country. If half of my African-American students suspected my good intentions and resisted my authority, how could I be sure that forcing them to participate in class activities would lead to their development of critical literacy and their empowerment? How could I be sure that a reinforcement of my authority as the teacher would not silence the underprivileged and even push some of them out of the college classroom?

"What to Do? What to Do?" J. Elspeth Stuckey’s urgent questioning resounding in the air, I realized that I had to confront the social conflicts my students brought from the outside world with them into the composition classroom before I could effectively perform my institutional duties as a teacher of writing.

The Teacher as the “Stranger”—Race and Class in the Context of “Symbolic Imposition”
Perceiving a deterioration in the quality of American young people’s literate language in communication, Shirley Brice Heath somberly asks, “Where were the teachers of these students? Were there not teachers who saw them daily and provided some forms of verbal support?” (“Fourth Vision” 293) Though Heath sounds as if she were holding the teachers responsible for the poor teacher-student relationships that fail to “build a sense of expertise and responsibility in students,” she actually lays the blame on public promotions of literacy and
basic skills in the 1980s, standardized tests, back-to-basics programs, and oral and written fill-in-the-blank exercises, which, she believes, make communication between the teacher and the student impossible in the classroom (293).

Heath is right that problems of teacher-student communication exist in the classroom, but standard tests and back-to-basics programs are only partly responsible. The communication problem in the classroom is, in a sense, intrinsic to teaching, which is "symbolic imposition" of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power, a point that Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron convincingly argued in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. It is schools' mission to conserve and reproduce the knowledge—the cultural arbitrary—legitimized by the dominant class, and to fulfil their obligations to the dominant class, schools have to create a context of "pedagogic communication"—the classroom (Bourdieu and Passeron 7). Such a context ensures that the power relations between the teacher and the student are such that they provide legitimate social conditions for imposition and inculcation. In this context, the teacher, the "master," has the legitimate power over the student, and the latter is obligated to receive whatever is taught to him or her without any resistance. As a consequence of the asymmetrical power relations in this context, the pedagogic communication between the teacher and the student is characterized by coercion, by students' submissiveness and obedience, by the affirmation of the teacher's values, by the infallibility of the teacher, and by the absence of a genuine interest in what is being communicated. For Bourdieu and Passeron, these characteristics differentiate pedagogic communication from "a normal definition of communication," in which a genuine concern for the effectiveness of communication is shared by all the participants (7). That the teachers are unable to provide students with verbal support is precisely due to the antagonistic teacher-student relationship determined by the need for symbolic imposition in the context of pedagogic communication, a context in which genuine communication seldom occurs.

It is therefore not surprising that the teacher is often the source of students' anxiety and fear in the classroom context. In his anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory, William B. Gudykunst proposes the concept of "the stranger" as the key to an understanding of anxiety and uncertainty in communication. The stranger, Gudykunst says, possesses the contradictory qualities of being both near and far at the same time:

> Strangers represent both the idea of nearness in that they are physically close and the idea of remoteness in that they have different values and ways of doing things. Strangers are physically present and participate in a situation and, at the same time, are outside the situation because they are members of different groups. (10)

For Gudykunst, the concept of the "stranger" has both a general significance and a more specific meaning. In a more general sense, everyone we meet is a potential stranger because we do not share all of our group memberships with anyone else (10). In a narrower sense, strangers may be categorized by one group membership.
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(e.g. ethnicity, social class, gender, role) with the assumption that the social identity based on this category is influencing their behavior (32). “Interacting with strangers is characterized by anxiety and uncertainty,” Gudykunst explains. When uncertainty, “a cognitive phenomenon that affects the way we think about strangers,” is above our maximum threshold, strangers’ behavior is seen as unpredictable and/or we do not have confidence in our predictions and explanations of their behavior. The consequence may be either we choose to end the interactions as soon as possible or we may try to gather the information we need to bring our uncertainty below our maximum thresholds (11).

Anxiety, the “affective (emotional) equivalent of uncertainty,” results from “feeling uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen” when we interact with strangers and respond to situations “with the anticipation of negative consequences” (12). When anxiety is above our maximum thresholds, Gudykunst asserts, “we are so uneasy that we do not want to communicate with strangers” (13). If we have to continue the interaction, misunderstanding will result.

No matter how our anxiety gets above our maximum thresholds, when it is too high our attention focuses exclusively on the anxiety and not on our communication with others. When anxiety is above our maximum thresholds, we tend to process information in a simplistic fashion. To illustrate, when our anxiety is too high, we only use our stereotypes to predict other people’s behavior. Because stereotypes are never accurate when applied to an individual, our predictions are inaccurate and our communication, therefore, is likely to be ineffective. (13; emphasis added)

Was I “the stranger” to those resisting African-American students in my basic writing class, physically close to them to impose academic discourse and Standard English on their home discourse and dialect, and yet so remote that I was outside their situation and caused them to anticipate negative consequences of my interactions with them? Did they use their stereotypes to predict my behavior? Did I violate their predictions and cause them anxiety? Did I subconsciously use stereotypes to predict my students’ behavior and make wrong predictions about them and cause both myself and them to feel anxious? Did the outspoken white students also use stereotypes and cause the African-American students to feel misunderstood and indignant?

If I am the stranger, what exactly is my “strangeness” and how does it affect my students?

Challenging the belief of the Freireans in North America that literacy empowers the oppressed, Stuckey calls on literacy workers to see “how literacy is a weapon, the knife that severs the society and slices the opportunities and rights of its poorest people” (118). Concurring with Porter Sexton that standard testing is an “insult that is now so popularly being hurled at our nation’s youth,” Stuckey pushes the argument farther. “The insult is the pervasive lie that language makes the difference,” she snaps, “a lie that goes to the heart not merely of English in the institution but of the public perception of English” (119). For
Stuckey, requiring that Standard English be taught in school is committing violence of literacy against minorities and the socioeconomically underprivileged. And to make literacy education empowering, she insists, “we must understand the connections between literacy and economy, literacy and work, literacy and race, gender and class, literacy and English teachers” (122).

What are the connections between me the English teacher and my basic writing students? What are the connections between literacy and race, class, and the teaching of writing?

I looked at myself: I belong to a culture and race different from that of my students. I hold a job that puts me in the American middle class. I am an academic insider; I hold two master’s degrees and a PhD in English to prove the good education I have received. In this basic writing class, I play the role of the teacher, the one who sets the rules, passes out the assignments, and determines students’ grades. I was empowered by my education and by the institution that hired me. An immigrant from a third world country, I was a believer of the American literacy myth embodied in Mike Rose’s story, even though the story, as well as my own literacy experiences, is also a narrative of personal struggle, shame, loss, and pain and of social inequality and injustice. I wanted my students to bear the pain and loss and believe in the promise, hope, and power of literacy. I wanted them to learn academic discourse and get their foothold in college so that their lives could become more fulfilling. Was I wrong to want them to believe in what I believed in?

I looked at my students: Young African-Americans. Working class. I knew from Robert C. Smith and Richard Seltzer’s studies that

on the standard sociological measures of class—education, employment, and income, and with respect to home ownership and welfare dependency—the class structure of the United States is easily differentiated on race lines, with whites possessing a decidedly advantaged class position. Whites are better educated (twice as likely to have been graduated from college), and are twice as likely to be employed; when employed, blacks are much more likely to be employed in low-wage service and laborer occupations. . . . This higher rate of unemployment and disproportionate representation in low-wage occupations results in a substantial gap in black-white income (blacks earn 60 percent of white income) and the representation of blacks among the poor and welfare-dependent at a rate three times greater than whites. (12)

And that this is the ethclass phenomenon:

Race and class intersect sharply to yield racial communities that are disproportionately poor and working class and disproportionately middle and upper class. (13)

In American society, which is “a chronologically racist society,” as Cornel West describes in “The Crisis in Black America,” the African-American people serve as “the symbol of being on the bottom,” suffering economic deprivation and “incessant assaults on black intelligence, beauty, character and possibility” (206, 235). The African-American people suffer a greater amount of alienation than whites because of their long history of disenfranchise and poverty, as
Robert C. Smith and Richard Seltzer's ethclass studies reveal. In this southern state of Arkansas, how many of my African-American students have experienced what I have not in this country?

Worse, in the academy they carry the label of "remedial" students (the term indicates not only academic deficiency but moral inadequacy) (Rose). They had been silent until I insisted that they speak. They have to abide by the rules specified in my syllabus. Their writing is to be assessed by me, and their grades from this class are to determine, to a large extent, if they can continue their studies in this institution of higher learning. They must have encountered contemptuous observations that they are "unworthy of [higher] education" and need "behavioral and moral instruction" more than anything else (Helmers 10). They must have heard stories about African-Americans' historical struggle for the right to literacy. According to Thomas Holt, ever since literacy education became institutionalized, African-Americans, their aspiration for knowledge notwithstanding, have developed a distrust in the educational system that would domesticate rather than empower them. Doris Wilkinson, observing African-American students' rebellion and resistance on various university campuses in the 1960s, interprets students' protest as a reaction to the ideology of racism and practice of discrimination and segregation in American society. To this day, African-American students in higher learning are still under represented, and most students in this basic writing class had not known the joy and pride of academic success.

This comparison of me and my African-American students brings home one clear and simple conclusion: I am the stranger, ignorant of their not-so-encouraging experiences with literacy and with schools in general. And my African-American students, not surprisingly, picked my skin color and accent as the most salient signs to identify me as different from them. The obstacles to genuine communication and empowerment were there in the classroom, and my students were more sensitive to their existence than I was: the context of "symbolic imposition" in which the power relations are asymmetrically structured so that Standard English and academic discourse can be effectively taught at the expense of students' home culture and discourse, the different views of education they and I held because of our different experiences, the control I had over their well-being in the academic world, the stigma the Composition Fundamentals carries with it. Given all these factors, it would be unnatural if the students had not felt uncertain and anxious under the circumstances.

From Conflict to Communication
How does my Chinese ethnicity affect my teaching? In trying to answer this question, I discovered that the conflict in my basic writing class was triggered by a far more complex and profound source of discontent than I had first assumed. This source of discontent—deeply rooted in the complexity of America's history, culture, education and politics—and my knowledge of it had an ambivalent effect on me: on the one hand, it humbled me and compromised
my inflated optimism in my own power to change my students’ lives through my teaching, compelling me to reflect more critically on my demands on my students in the name of empowering them. On the other hand, the knowledge changed my perception of myself in relation to my students. It made me aware that despite my good intentions the distance between me and my basic writing students resulting from our differences in culture, race, class, power relations, and educational experiences was almost insurmountable. The knowledge causes a dilemma for me: my understanding of why my students did not believe in the emancipatory power of literacy as I did and why they did not share my enthusiasm in studying Standard English and academic discourse made it more difficult for me to stick to academic standards and push them to meet the standards as I had before. If I could neither change the nature of teaching as symbolic imposition nor ignore my institutional obligation to teach the “cultural arbitrary,” what could I do to persuade my students that I had their best interests in mind and that I, despite all my “strangeness,” understood their dreams, needs, feelings, and conditions? What could I do to reassure them that I was not there to “terrorize” or “colonialize” them but to help initiate them into the academic world and to pursue happiness in life (McLaren)? In other words, what could I do to reduce their uncertainty and anxiety so that their interest in reading and writing would increase? Gudykunst speculates:

If strangers accommodate to our communication style and we perceive their intent to be positive, in contrast, it will lead to reductions in our uncertainty and anxiety about communicating with them. (27)

My African-American students must have perceived me as unaccommodating, for not only did I not speak their dialect but I was pointing out “mistakes” in their writing, mistakes that were mistakes only because I was teaching Standard English and academic discourse. Strategies like group brainstorming and collaborative learning—ways of learning favored in some African-American communities (Miller and Lei)—did not work because I forgot that neither I nor the white students had been accepted by the African-American students as part of their community. Thus, when required to share their ideas and writing with their group members in class, many of the African-American students were very often defensive and silent, worried that the purpose of the group conferences was to criticize their dialect and their ways of talking and writing. Even in groups that had no white students the African-American students were reluctant to comment on each other’s writing, afraid that their critical responses might be used by me to flunk them at the end of the semester.

Can I change my communication style and ways of teaching so that my African-American students perceive my intent to be positive?

I struggled to change my communication and teaching style; I showed interest in my students as individuals and asked them questions about their work and school experiences, their likes and dislikes, their views of their reading and writing needs, their feelings about the relationship between writing and their careers. I was
surprised both by their responsiveness and by their rather objective perception of themselves and their needs. I began to realize my folly in seeing them all as "basic writers"—Hadn't I been using stereotypes in my communication with them?

I anticipated students' feeling of distrust, humiliation, and frustration when giving back writing assignments and following up with individual conferences to help them see why I suggested revision. This personal contact not only dissolved students' distrust quickly but helped them revise more effectively.

I used more positive and specific guiding questions in group conferences to help develop a trust among African-American and white students, acknowledging that they had the right to demand as much articulate verbal instruction and support as they needed from the teacher.

I paid more attention to students' individual needs, giving short lectures and one-on-one help to overcome their self-perceived difficulties, ranging from putting words on paper, expressing thoughts and feelings explicitly in written words, supporting opinions with evidence, developing ideas logically, organizing thoughts coherently, writing grammatical sentences, or using punctuations correctly, to "poor attitude toward reading and writing."

I taught writing conventions, grammar, and process in a more descriptive way, trying not only to call their attention to audiences and purposes but also compare similarities and differences between dialects and Standard English.

I selected for them educational films that discussed racial issues in America, and I encouraged students, African-American and white, to write about their experiences relating to race and education.

I even learned to turn my eyes away when a single parent brought her two-year-old daughter to class, knowing that she was newly divorced and could not afford to hire a baby-sitter.

By the mid-term, the class atmosphere began to change, and more students began to show more interest in reading and writing. The tension between white and African-American students and between my students and me began to recede, as most students became more involved in the learning activities in class. A learning environment began to take shape, though I had to spend much more time preparing for the class, writing more careful responses, and conferencing more with each student. I learned to be much more mindful of the happenings in my students' lives and much more accommodating of their needs outside the classroom (needs that I used to consider their excuses for skipping classes).

The last class period I asked the students to talk about their first semester as college students. This time the tone in general was different. Pat, one of the most resistant students, wrote:

When I first began college the most frightening word that I would hear was composition. I dreaded hearing the word composition until I started paying attention in class and understanding the subject. I remember the first couple of weeks I was like a rock in the sea always sinking to the bottom, toward the middle I was like a submarine coming up when I chose, and at the end of the semester like a sailboat I was always floating on top going with the flow.
Little did I know that he had so dreaded composition. As I read his note, I began to wonder if I had misinterpreted his defensiveness and fear as racial bias. Knowing that he had been on the brink of dropping the class, I was glad to see that he stayed and struggled and finally gained some control over his writing as well as over his college education.

John, a quiet but obviously resentful student at the beginning of the semester, demonstrated a kind of self-reflexivity that was comforting to me:

Composition Fundamentals was a college course that I had to take but didn't want to take. My first day in the class was very boring. I thought I would test my way out. My instructor didn't think my writing was good enough so I had to stay in her class. I knew I wasn't going to like the class, but after a couple of weeks I changed my mind. Dr. X. Gale was a good instructor after all.

The course work in class was fair. It wasn't too hard and it wasn't too easy. I enjoyed the writing assignments and the group discussions. The midterm exam was difficult. Maybe it was because I didn't prepare as well as I should have. I think I have earned my A in this class. Dr. Gale gave the class handouts that I found to be very helpful. The handout on clichés really helped me to make my expressions more colorful.

Overall I would rate this class as excellent. I have significantly improved my writing. . . . I have learned new writing techniques that make my writing beautiful. I know that I will be well prepared for Composition I . . . .

I was also glad to find out the reason for his earlier sullen silence, that he was disappointed with my decision to keep him in the basic writing class. How many more shared his disappointment on that second day of class, I wonder?

Rhonda, who was among my early "critics," could not forget the confrontation and my ethnicity. She wrote:

I enjoyed my English class this year. Most students wanted to know or just couldn't figure out how in the world someone from another culture other than ours [was] going to teach them. I like my teacher for her boldness. She was able to correct us and go on not dealing with hurt feelings as if we were babies. She is very thorough and gives you every opportunity to excel. She cares for each and everyone of us and always has our best interest at heart.

Thank you, Dr. Gale, for your time, patience and understanding. I assure you that next semester will be much better!

It was a pleasurable note, conveying a sense of optimism that I had not found in her at the beginning of the semester. However, the note also ripped open a wound that I thought had healed. So, despite all my efforts and all her compliments I remained the stranger to Rhonda, though a stranger who cared and had students' "best interest[s] at heart."

White Terror, Yellow Peril, Black Rage—A Not So Optimistic Thought
Perhaps a class like this will never come my way again. Looking back, I wanted to be able to say that my painstaking efforts were well worth it since most students improved their writing considerably, passed the course, and wrote a similarly positive note to me. But I think of Ashley with an apology, a bright and warm
white student who quit coming to class soon after the conflict, in which she was
the most contentious. Did I discourage her with a shift of my attention from those
who spoke out to those who were silent in my class? Did I appear to have swapped
her best interests for the best interests of those who were less privileged than she
was? Did I exclude her inadvertently from the conversation in class with my
overconcern for differences between the black dialect and Standard English, a
topic that was of little relevance to her writing and life? Her friend, one of the
students in my class, told me that Ashley had taken on a second full-time job and
gotten involved in a romantic affair and that that was what kept her from
attending my class. Was that the whole truth?

I also think of Martha, an intelligent African-American student who had
been responding angrily to any sign of racial discrimination, in her papers, in
class discussions, in her journals, in her encountering with the readings, and in
her conversations with me. She had a hospitalized grandmother who depended
on her for care, so she had missed a lot of classes. Close to the end of the semester
she stopped showing up in class, after having completed 80% of the required
work for the course. What did I fail to do to keep her going until the end?

And there were Alisha and Lisa, whom I could do little to help: one simply
ignored my major requirements for the course and the other seemed to be unable
to comprehend any of my suggestions for revision. I wonder if they were victims
of my “strangeness.”

These cases of failure and those moments when I felt the futility of trying
to reach every one of my students have quietly undercut the joy I felt after the
semester was over. Looking back, I find myself not as optimistic as Christine
E. Sleeter and Peter L. McLaren, who deplore “whiteness” as the “invisible
culture of terror” and believe that actions against their own white supremacy
will make a difference (49):

As educated whites, we can speak to an educated white audience and attempt to
contribute to dialogue and praxis oriented around the deconstruction of white
supremacy. . . . We urge [white] readers to examine our own collective positions of
privilege, identify actions we can take to share power with non-white people, and work
toward racial justice. (22)

Although the call is noble in itself, I hesitate to agree that the “deconstruction
of white supremacy” is all we need to achieve racial justice in teaching. If we
heed the voices of Lisa Delpit and her African-American colleagues, we cannot
but notice their deep uneasiness with white teachers’ “progressive” attitude
toward black students: “Let me help you find your voice. I promise not to
criticize one note as you search for your own song” (18). For the progressive
white teacher, not criticizing black students is an act of sharing power in the
classroom, but to Delpit and her colleagues, this power-sharing process does
exactly the opposite—it deprives black students of opportunities to learn skills
essential to their survival in the mainstream, white culture. To me, the call to
deconstruct white supremacy may also lead to another equally unfair practice.
in the classroom, practice that may well harm those white students like Ashley, who, like my African-American students, are struggling on the margin of the academic world and need special support too to survive in the mainstream culture.

I am not as optimistic as Tom Fox, who believes that a more inclusive literacy; a teacher, white or of color, who knows "where and how to listen" and "where and how to see," and a dialogic teacher-student relationship will suffice to change the nature of teaching as symbolic imposition of the dominant culture and discourse (301). What Fox has inadvertently written off is the difficulty of where and how to listen and where and how to see, difficulty that is caused not only by teaching as symbolic imposition but by the distance between the teacher and the student—social, economic, academic, racial, cultural, linguistic, and perceptual. To look, listen, and see at the wrong place in a wrong way is just so easy, as can be illustrated by the relationship between Al the basic writer and Morgan the peer group leader in Anne DiPardo's ethnographic study. Both are of African-American origin; Morgan rightly sees Standard English as the passport to the academic world and a better way of life and succeeds in her studies. She is Al's group leader, and she tries very hard to "bond" with Al, encouraging him to master Standard English and excel in his writing class and offering moral support whenever she believes Al needs it. Ironically, Morgan's efforts lead Al to reject her both as the group leader and as his peer, and Al requests to be transferred to another group of which a white student was the peer group leader. There are many ways to read this story, and I see in it the difficulty of communication caused not so much by different individual experiences as by the clashes of values embodied in Standard English and the black English. Taking for granted that Standard English is good for her and therefore good for all other black students, Morgan fails to understand the deeper implications of Standard English and Black English for Al. For Al, Standard English and Black English are not just two dialects as Morgan views them; they represent the two dramatically different worlds that fragment his sense of identity, disorienting him emotionally and socially. Much attracted as he is by what he calls "correct" English—Standard English—Al cannot give up his home discourse, the black English, as Morgan believes that he should. The black English means to Al what it doesn't to Morgan: it gives him the sense of belonging, identity, and pride that he cannot find in the academic community. Al's rejection of Morgan makes me wonder: do we the writing teachers understand our students who are like Al? Will we ever be able to understand them fully and give them what they want?

I am not as optimistic as bell hooks and Cornel West, who pour their rage into their words speaking for their disenfranchised race and believe that their fighting will fix the racial inequality in this country. I am not as optimistic as Marian Yee, who looks at herself squarely, talks about the "Yellow Peril narrative" and its discrimination of early Chinese immigrants, and then proudly claims the platform in the English classroom, assuming that times are different (28).

I dare not claim that I, the teacher of those basic writers, know exactly how to handle the social issues they bring into the classroom. Nor dare I claim that I
can make a difference in their lives. The reports of student resistance in the classroom make me ponder how we teachers can really lead students to believe that learning and writing will empower them. The remark of Cecilia Rodrígues Milanés’s student, “This teacher is a feminist and her views are fucked up”; the not-so-subtle exchanges among Susan Miller’s students when facing the final exam; the collective resistance of Evelyn Ashton-Jones’ s graduate students at the University of Southern Mississippi to Anthony Petrosky’s observation reported in the article, “Rural Poverty and Literacy in the Mississippi Delta: Dilemmas, Paradoxes, and Conundrums”; Terry Dean’s heroic endeavor to communicate effectively in a multicultural classroom; AnnLouise Keating’s struggle with students’ confusion of whiteness and white people in her U.S. literature and composition courses, and many other similar stories—all of them, no matter in how different manners they appear, seem to signify a tension between the teacher and the student in an artificial communication context, with the latter resisting imposition, be it the visible teacher in front of them or the invisible authority speaking to them through the text chosen by their teacher, and with the former guiltily looking everywhere for causes of such confrontations, in race, class, gender, power relations, economy, teaching approaches and methods, cultures and communities.

And no doubt the racial issues further complicate the pedagogic issues. Reading Lisa Delpit, I am further informed of the complexity of teaching “other people’s children”: Delpit’s criticism of liberals’ emphasis of individual freedom and autonomy in teaching and her insistence on explicitness and direct instruction in teaching; an African-American doctoral student’s indignant responses to a teacher’s adopting the process theory and collaborative learning in her classroom, that the teacher “didn’t teach anything, absolutely nothing”; and many African-American teachers’ suspicion of research and liberal teaching approaches and their strong desire to teach “skills” that will make African-American children more competitive in the job market (26-27, 31, 12-18). These are only few of the numerous pedagogical questions that are raised in relation to racial issues in education. Where should the teachers look and how?

English teachers believe in the power of literacy and want to make a difference. “We are, nevertheless, still at an impasse,” Stuckey claims and then asks:

What to do with our profession, what to do with our mechanisms of oppression, what to do with our hysteria or complacency or resignation, what to do with the great disparities among our resources and knowledge and access to help, what to do with a world whose literacy pampers us but targets those we teach, what to do with a violent history, a miserly present, and a myopic future? What to do—we English teachers—to deal with all of that? (124)

What did I do? Can I claim that I found a solution to the conflict and confrontation in my basic writing class? Can I boast that I finally found the causes of my students’ rebellion? Do I believe that I made a difference in my basic writing
students' lives? I dare not say that I know the answers to these questions. All I can say is that thanks to my students' rage, resistance, and life stories, I listened and learned and came to recognize the importance of Stuckey's questions. My students have become part of my consciousness, making me more sensitive to the impact of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and authority on my teaching and on their learning in the classroom. I may never be able to answer Stuckey's questions to my satisfaction, but as a teacher I will never be the same.

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