

## **Circles of Influence: My Research Journey into Culturally Engaged Instruction**

**By Renee Moore, NBCT**

*I currently teach English and journalism at Broad Street High School in Shelby, Mississippi. Broad Street serves 370 students in grades 8-12. There are 27 teachers on the faculty, one guidance counselor, a librarian, and a principal. 99% of the students are African American; 100% are on free and reduced lunch.*

*As an English teacher at a rural all-Black high school, I enjoyed a genuine fellowship with my students, many of whom I worked with outside of school in church and community activities. Lessons in literature and writing went reasonably well (for a beginner), but then, I started to teach grammar. Pardon the cliché, but it was like hitting a brick wall. Whenever I tried to teach grammar or usage, my students put up a fearful, sometimes hostile, resistance. Yet, in my class surveys and course evaluations, the students and their parents have consistently asked that I teach more grammar. At first, I tried to account for these contradictions with various excuses ("Grammar is just boring to them; I need to make it more interesting!"). Still, the tension and the fear were real. Looking back, I realize I shared their uneasiness with the topics; however, I felt it was my duty to help them become proficient in "standard" usage.*

*I had two simultaneous responses to the wall. On the one hand, I immediately started searching for and experimenting with methodologies. How could I teach them grammar more effectively? On the other hand, I had begun what would become a career long action-research study on the issues surrounding the teaching of standard American English to African American students.*

*"Circles of Influence" chronicles my research process and findings. For more about my work, visit my website, "Culturally Engaged Instruction (CEI): Putting theory into practice," at <http://www.goingpublicwithteaching.org/contents.html>.*

My teacher research experience began with a frustrated outburst in my teaching journal during my second year in the classroom:

The first semester is over and it is time for serious reflection and preparation. We [the English Department] have decided to launch the new grading scale. We will use it to penalize students uniformly for the most common grammatical errors after we distribute the departmental grammar handbook.... I approach this with a good deal of anxiety. Will it achieve the desired results, or will we simply frustrate the students and make life miserable for everyone? One grim omen has been the grammar diagnostic that I used at the start of the school year. This past week, I had my accelerated 9<sup>th</sup> grade class take the same test again as a post-test. I've only made it about halfway through the scoring, but the results so far are depressing; most of the students' scores improved only slightly, several stayed the same, and some dropped! This is after a solid semester—two grading periods—of intense grammar instruction! So what now?" (12/23/91)

Since that time, I have been investigating the teaching of standard English with my students, all of whom are African American. I have boxes and bags of raw data: tapes and transcripts of individual interviews and group discussions; notes from interviews with parents; teacher and student surveys, teaching logs, and observation journals. Making some sense of all this as I continue teaching every day has been challenging. I have learned, however, that teacher research is not about looking for some great new way to teach: It is the prima ballerina at the bar; it is the concert pianist playing scales; it is the basketball star practicing lay-ups; it is digging for treasure deep in one's own backyard.

Later, that same year, I was writing in my teaching log about our work on part of a *Romeo and Juliet* unit. I found myself spiraling off into reflections that led to the first coherent formation of what would become my research question. I repeated this process of observing my work, writing about it, reflecting on what I was doing and seeing, then posing more questions over the next months. These self-talks became the first and most critical circle of dialogue for my action research.

Although I was working on the research alone, there were some important dialogues with my co-workers. The topic of grammar instruction came up frequently within our English department. This is the one area on which most of us disagreed with the state curriculum framework. All topics related to grammar and usage are lumped together under one competency and above grade eight, the framework simply says students will "maintain proficiency" in standard usage and conventions. However, as my former department head loved to point out,

"Everybody likes this teaching grammar through writing stuff because all it requires is doing a little 5-minute review of something we assume the students already know; then showing them how they can use it to improve a particular piece of writing. But somebody has to do the dirty work of teaching the concepts the first time, and that's the job nobody wants."

In truth, most of us were teaching grammar skills as if every time were the students' first time being exposed to the topic. After these generally unsuccessful lessons, we would commiserate over how little the students knew or remembered from the last time they had studied the topic.

From one of these discussions, I decided that one of my goals my next school year would be to look at how I go about teaching grammar and what combination of factors created the context in which I did it. The word *context*, however, gave me trouble. What counted as context? Everything? How would I describe or measure the influence of context on my teaching?

It was my Bread Loaf [Graduate School of English] teacher and friend, Jackie Jones Royster who first suggested that I might need to examine how I was defining culture and how others were defining it. Jerri Cobb Scott, of NCTE, now at University of Memphis, was helpful in this area also. The two of them drove down to the Delta and visited my school. They commented repeatedly on the distinctive "Southernness" of the school. "Southern" in the sense of the traditions of the African American communities of the old rural South and how those were evident throughout the school. For example, students deferred to the two female visitors, calling them "ma'am," and they watched as our parent volunteer hung elaborate Christmas decorations on each classroom door. These things, they pointed out to me, were part of our cultural context.

I began to understand that the particulars of a child's community help define what is important and acceptable in a child's education. I became convinced, moreover, that I needed to gather such information and analysis in conjunction with the students and with their respective communities in order for any real teaching to occur. The most effective teachers I knew accomplished this by getting to know each student and at least attempting to know his/her family or family situation. This process could be a major undertaking for the typical secondary teacher who has to work with upwards of 100 (more commonly 120 -- 150) students per day. What does it take on the part of a teacher to even begin to "get to know" this many students and their circumstances well enough to teach them something as intimate and complex as language arts? I was about to find out as I prepared to carefully document the journey.

I also had to broaden my circle of critical conversation. I started a review of the professional literature, which I sometimes think of as dialogue with an extended network of colleagues and mentors. I was both thrilled and dismayed to find the questions I was raising had in fact been asked many times by an array of experts. I re-familiarized myself with the work of Geneva Smitherman, Michele Foster, and Asa Hilliard, while opening new "conversations" with Keith Gilyard, Lisa Delpit, and Emilie Siddie-Walker. All together, I read

over 75 reputable studies. The review was helpful; but it was not enough to answer the questions my classroom situation presented. I found it difficult during class time or even after school trying to make connections between all the reading I had done of the academic research and what I was dealing with daily in the class room.

One important lesson I did take away from the research was that there was not any one especially effective method of grammar instruction with Black students. I realized simply analyzing the methods of successful English teachers would not be enough.

The review later became a paper for one of my graduate courses at Bread Loaf School of English, at Middlebury College in Vermont. My Bread Loaf mentors and colleagues encouraged me to pursue the research, so I applied for a teacher research grant from the Spencer Foundation. As I wrote the grant proposal, I in turn found I had a long list of questions for my mentors and network colleagues, including:

1. What are teacher researcher groups and how do they function?
2. What is the difference between qualitative and quantitative analysis?
3. What is ethnography, and how does it apply to what I'm trying to do?
4. What do I, as a teacher researcher, need to know, if anything, about standard educational research methods?
5. What kind of data would I need? How would I go about collecting it?
6. How do I know whether I have a good research question?
7. How do I ensure that my data is valid and reliable?
8. How many different ways are there to analyze data? How do I decide which is best suited for this project?

One day as I was wrestling these questions, I wandered into Dixie Goswami's living room at her summer house on the Bread Loaf campus. As I sat on the floor bouncing ideas off Dixie and other BL friends, we got a surprise visit from Ann Berthoff, a great scholar of composition and rhetoric. She launched into a discussion of writing, the power of language, and why we should reclaim practical criticism. In the midst of her amazing remarks that

afternoon, Berthoff made the following observation: "We are born into history. The relation between individual and society should not be a dichotomy, but a plurality."

About this same time, I also discovered Gloria Ladson-Billings' work, summarized in her wonderful book *The DreamKeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students*. With Berthoff's observation still ringing in my ears, Ladson-Billings words seemed amplified: "There is a stubborn refusal in American education to recognize African Americans as a distinct cultural group. While it is recognized that African Americans make up a distinct racial group, the acknowledgement that this racial group has a distinct culture is still not recognized. It is presumed that African American children are exactly like white children but just need a little extra help.... Thus the reason for their academic failure continues to be seen as wholly environmental and social" (9).

After much discussion and painstaking revision, I came to a working definition of culturally engaged instruction (CEI):

Empowering language arts instruction is a dynamic practice shaped by informed and collaborative analysis of the particular cultural experiences, strengths, and learning goals of a specific group of students within a particular community.

These words, first written in the idyllic setting of Bread Loaf's Vermont mountain campus, took on an entirely different character once I was back in the throes a typically chaotic school year. By Christmas break, I was re-reading my own research paper and asking myself, which points still mattered? Out of 30 pages, I found ten thoughts that still resonated:

1. "Language arts instruction among African American students must take into account the specific historical and cultural features of language use and abuse within and upon the African American community."
2. "Helping African American students reach their full potential as literate citizens..."
3. "Black students learned better when (and where) Black teachers had more control over the curriculum and classroom practices."

4. "Value of studying Black schools and teachers especially in the South that retain the earlier traditions..."
5. "We should not perpetuate the myth that acquiring proper usage is a guarantee of social or professional success."
6. "The key factor becomes not language but the contextual use of that language."
7. "Social behaviors are learned along with language by native speakers that are not easily duplicated for those who learn the language as a second tongue."
8. "Many things in standard American English are inherently racist."
9. "Why do we teach SAE and will that knowledge and how we teach it empower the students and their communities?"
10. "Black teachers' attitudes and expectations of their students were an important part of their methodology."

One of the dangers of doing the classroom research alone was not having anyone around to contradict me when I was wrong, or check me when I started to get, as Black folks say, "beside myself." My circle of online mentors and colleagues performed this very important function for me. For example, one Sunday afternoon, I got an email from another Bread Loaf teacher and mentor, Andrea Lunsford, in response to a question I had posed a few days earlier about using surveys to measure teacher attitudes toward student language use. She reminded me: "I think you'll have to find a way to at least fully acknowledge the 'halo' effect likely to accompany applying your own measures to yourself."

A day later, a message from Jackie Royster brought me even closer to reality. My question was whether I needed to compare some "objective" measures of my students' performance in grammar with those of students from classes that did not meet the criteria for CEI. She cautioned:

"You could use pre/post data for your class and another teacher's class who is not consciously using the pedagogies that you're talking about. I wouldn't put too much weight to this data though. My concern is that you would need to be clear in articulating this

culturally conscious approach in the specific terms of intervention strategies to make it meaningful. Otherwise, it seems awfully messy to try to tie performance to classroom culture rather than changes in attitude, etc.”

If I were right that a teacher needed to develop a cultural engagement with his or her students in order to be effective in language arts instruction, then the student’s perception of their English teacher mattered a great deal. That spring, I selected the first group of students and parents who would work with me in the research process, and another circle was born.

My research assistant was Sheila (not her real name), a high school senior whom I had taught for the two previous years. She was familiar with my work on BreadNet (our online exchange network). In fact, she had taken great interest in the work of a professional researcher from the Philadelphia-based Research for Action who came to study my classroom. Sheila was delighted to learn that a person could make a career of doing that sort of research and vowed that she would some day be such a researcher. Her enthusiasm for research and her strong language skills made her an invaluable help to me. I used part of the grant money to pay her a small stipend. Her perspective added yet another circle of influence to my expanding research dialogue.

Choosing the students who would make up the focus group for my research interviews was difficult. I wanted a mix of males and females and of ability levels in grammar and usage. Also important were their parents or significant adults, who would make up the adult focus group. I deliberately chose students whose parents I knew would be more cooperative and likely to participate with the project all the way through, although I did try to diversify the group in terms of economic status.

With the help of my online partners from BLTN, I engaged my students and parents in discussions of the question: “What makes a good English teacher?” I knew from previous experience that students from our small, closely-knit community often expressed themselves more freely to distant online peers than they would to me or to their



classmates. I was surprised at the commonality in opinions among my rural students and their more urbane, online counterparts in East Orange, New Jersey. These comments were typical:

CA (Mississippi): A good English teacher is a teacher that has a good relationship with their students. Not only do they teach their students but they talk to the students about things other than the things that are supposed to be taught. Good teachers take time out and speak to students like they are your friends. They never give up on any student no matter how much a student does not understand the work, the teacher always keeps their patience and tries to help the student no matter what."

KL (Mississippi): I believe a good English teacher is a teacher that teaches and explains a lesson and not just assigns the work."

PW (New Jersey): A good teacher is understanding and supportive. They never give up on you."

A spontaneous discussion with one of my senior English classes about learning English grammar at school proved to be another rich dialogue. Some of the student remarks included: "When some teachers explain about grammar, I'm embarrassed to ask a question." "English is more embarrassing than math." "You don't want people to know that you can't talk." "When I asked [Mrs. X] to explain something, she'd just wave her hands. She doesn't help us."

The next logical and essential circle was parents and other members of the larger school community. A Saturday morning conversation with one of the parents taught me much about our community's view of the study of English grammar. A friendly, college-educated father, he looked straight at me and said:

"English has a way of degrading you. Talkin' is s'posed to be natural. I feel angry. I'm angry about this. This deals with my self-esteem. They always tell us we're shiftless; we're lazy. I passed ENG 101 class at junior college, but the teacher

flunked me and wrote on my last paper that it was because I “talked funny.” English is a weapon of oppression. Just another tool to keep me in my place. Even if I master the language...[trails off].”

He was one of the five I had invited to participate in my parent’s group that year. His comments were typical of the group’s response to my question: Why are our students so resistant to learning and using standard English?

Only a few weeks later, at a reception for a retiring colleague, another retiree who had taught for over 40 years in our school system, reminisced about the period during which the schools here were first integrated. Black teachers, she said, were paired with white teachers in the white schools because the prevailing opinion among many whites was that they [black teachers] could not teach.” I made a mental (and later a journal) note to interview her. Her comments had sparked a round of indignant response from the retirees that, in fact, Black students had been better taught in the old segregated schools than they were now.

What I noticed in these conversations with the parents and other community members was a sense of loss; a grudging resignation that the price of bringing African American students into the mainstream of academic success meant giving up some very important cultural ground. I found myself going back to my paper, especially my original thesis. Using what I had learned from the many discussions and from my classroom experiences, I began to unpack and expand the terms I had used almost six years earlier. Something akin to the delivery of my first child occurred as I watched what had begun as an academic exercise come alive.

The next summer, back at Bread Loaf, I returned to my notes from all of these discussions to further unpack the key parts of my original thesis: (1) “Empowering language arts instruction” is teaching information or skills in such a way as to help students become effective communicators. I now preferred the term *language arts* to *English*, even though I am a secondary teacher, because it is more accurate and comprehensive. (2)

“Dynamic practice” means changing teaching practices; varying them according to the make-up and needs of the student population. (3) Such practice is “shaped by informed collaborative analysis,” in other words, the teacher is actively seeking knowledge about the nature and goals of the student population, including evaluating and assessing the information gathered. Indeed, the information gathering process itself should be shared with other professional colleagues, but most importantly with the students.

The focus of this information gathering should be on (4) “the unique cultural experiences, strengths, and learning goals of a specific group of students.” This suggests an ethnographic profile of this community of learners: what are their values, beliefs, language patterns, literacy habits, family patterns, and attitudes toward education. This can be done formally and informally.

Of the items listed above, which may be most helpful in facilitating language study? What interests and talents are available to be shared? I use the term “learning goals” rather than “needs” since the latter implies a deficit. It is not necessary to annually re-teach everything in the grammar workbook to everybody. It is necessary, however, to keep the students’ goals focused within the social context in which they must live and succeed; what are the goals and expectations of the community that produced these students and with whom they must primarily communicate? Based on a collaborative analysis, I believe I should be able to set individual and class goals in language arts. To be a truly effective language arts teacher, I must limit and tailor assessments and instruction for each group of students and resist the pressure to over-generalize and stereotype.

As I continued to weave my findings and my thinking about culturally engaged instruction through my various discussion circles, I began to see more clearly the patterns that lay beneath the surface of my classroom routines. I could begin discern where and how the real teaching and learning was occurring (or not occurring) specifically in regards to grammar instruction.

I put this new understanding to work the next fall as I refined my pre-assessment process and the developed individualized communications skills portfolios for each student, which required the participation of a significant adult member of the community. I have always used some kind of pre-assessment, but that was the first year I used the specific process that grew out of my research on Culturally Engaged Instruction. I was very meticulous about recording the results. Looking back, I also realize that my earlier pre-assessments had been too long and had too many separate parts, making the analysis very time consuming. I had learned it was more important that the students and I be able to draw some immediate conclusions from this early assessment, so we could begin working in a more personalized way sooner in the school year. Based on my hypothesis, an early, accurate, and detailed knowledge of the students is vital for culturally engaged instruction. Certainly, such knowledge is important for all good teaching; CEI is simply good teaching for this particular population of students.

The pre-assessments do several things at once. First, they help me learn about my students' strengths and weaknesses in key areas of language arts instruction. Second, they help my students learn my classroom procedures and give the class a preview of the type of work we will be doing during the year. Third, the process of doing the assessments provides every student an opportunity to begin the school year with a successful assignment and the same grade (an "A" for following the directions). With the fear of failure removed, I eliminate the need to cheat or the need to impress. (Contrary to my earlier misgivings, the students do give an honest effort on these assessments). Fourth, I get to give the students information on how to be successful the rest of the year and some academic motivation that, hopefully, they will remember through the year. Finally, I get students, and ideally their parents, involved right at the beginning in collaboratively setting learning goals for the year.

My pre-assessment process revolves around having students demonstrate through performance their abilities in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Only reading and

writing are tested in the district or statewide assessments; however, I include the oral skills not only because they are part of the state framework, but also because they are highly valued communication skills within the local African American community and the ones in which the students tend to be strongest.

We begin with a short, carefully chosen reading passage. It is almost always by or about an African American (preferably someone with whom they may not be familiar). First, we do a timed reading to determine their speed. Then, they are allowed to read the article in full, set it aside, and free write what they remember from the article (tests recall, ability to pick up on main ideas and key details). Next, I'll have them listen to an audio tape of a professional speaker on a motivational or inspirational topic (such as how to be a better reader; how to be a successful student in high school). They are required to take notes during the tape. Scanning these later gives me an idea of their skill at listening comprehension. Finally, they may use their notes from both exercises to draft an essay. I make sure to give the essay an I-Search twist, such as "What, if anything, did you get from the reading and or the lecture that might help you this school year? What goals would you personally like to accomplish this year in English class?" These essays become my writing and grammar samples. All this usually takes a few days.

By the end of the first full week of school, we are ready to begin analyzing the results together and developing personal learning plans (PEPs). The PEP is the first requirement in the communications skills portfolio for my class. I spend at least one full class period introducing the portfolio. There are several points in the portfolio that are negotiable, both initially and as the school year progresses. The final step is for them to take the PEP and the portfolio checklist home. Each student must identify a significant adult of his/her choice (parent, relative, neighbor, teacher, church member, scout leader, etc.) who is willing to act as a mentor for the duration of the school year. The mentor's role is to encourage the student to keep up and complete his or her portfolio. Students must explain the portfolio to the mentors and get them to sign a contract. I contact the mentors as soon

as I know who they are to introduce myself, answer questions, take suggestions for adjustments in the PEP or portfolio, and open the door for communication throughout the year. All these steps help us create a culturally engaged learning environment.

Applying what I have learned from my research specifically to the teaching of grammar instruction has led to several meaningful changes in my classroom practice. First, I made a decision to talk with my students honestly about why we are required to study and master standard American English. Second, I use what I have learned about the students, starting with the extensive pre-assessment.

Over time, I realized I was searching for a more empowering approach to language arts instruction. I wanted to teach the language arts in such a way that each student not only became technically proficient or skillful, but also became cognizant of the effects of language on others. Just as important, I wanted my students to understand, how language arts/communication skills could be used to project one's own ideas and to assess more critically the ideas of others. Such instruction must be dynamic, as opposed to static or scripted, even by the best-intentioned curriculum materials. It must continually change in response to a number of stimuli. To do that, our teaching must be informed by a very deliberate analysis produced cooperatively by the trained professional teacher of English in continuous critical dialogue with herself, and ever-widening circles of students, parents, and colleagues.

I developed the term, "Culturally Engaged Instruction" to describe how teaching and learning occur in my classroom. The students and I are engaged" (committed to an interactive, mutually satisfying relationship over an extended period of time) in an exchange of cultural information. I have learned over time how dependent upon and integrated into the cultural context language arts instruction truly is. The students and parents must develop a level of trust with the teachers in order to compensate for the historically derived mistrust that language arts instruction has engendered within large

segments of the African American community. This goes beyond just a superficial "I like my teacher"(although that may be the way the students articulate it). It is rooted in respect and communication.

Like so many of my colleagues, however, my classroom work has been impacted by the current frenzy of reactions to No Child Left Behind. I have spent years developing and analyzing my pre-assessments, only to have my school district insist I use a pre-packaged pretest for all students. Similarly, the administration has attempted to move all the major assessments of students out of teacher control by requiring only district office-generated end-of-grading-period tests. This stripping of professional responsibilities from teachers cannot bode well for development of quality teaching in our classrooms.

Nevertheless, I continue to implement three key lessons from my work. I continue to encourage my students to explore the truth behind "standard" English. I continue to use my own pre-assessments to learn about my students, their families, and help create a truly individualized learning experience (to the extent possible given our class loads). Grammar instruction reflects my position that my students already have language, and that language does not need to be "fixed" or "corrected." They need to learn a new way to communicate with a very different, sometimes hostile audience.