A DIFFERENT DISCOURSE: EXPLORING HYBRID ACADEMIC WRITING

by

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ABSTRACT

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In this project, I argue that hybrid discourse assignments contribute to beginning writers’ understanding of Standard American English (SAE) and the academic writing genre. Today’s first-year college writing classroom is a complex site of multicultural interaction, one that involves not only students from different ethnic backgrounds, but also marginalized writers, such as students with learning disabilities and ESL speakers. Many of these students experience difficulties writing in the standard academic voice; as a result, they come to view their own communication skills as deficient. Introducing hybrid discourse assignments in the composition class, however, can help all students who struggle with the complexities of academic language. When students understand that their own language is as complex and rule driven as SAE, they learn to view academic writing as a different discourse that is not more, nor less valid than their own. Since the English composition community has recognized the usefulness of personal, narrative, and experimental writing, this project expands our understanding of the complex interactions between academic discourse and students’ home language.
This project is dedicated to my father, Jose Felix Astacio, who showed me the power and beauty of language.

I also dedicate this project to my cats, Tom and Whisky.
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Introduction

The basic goal of any English composition course is to teach students those elements of academic discourse that will help them write coherently and rationally during their tenure in a college or university. This definition is grounded in a paradox: teachers want their students to learn adequate writing skills that they can apply across the curriculum, but it is generally accepted by many instructors that achievement of this goal is nearly impossible, since a single semester or even a one year composition class cannot adequately prepare students for the rigors of academic work across all disciplines. As colleges face increasing governmental pressure to document quantifiable rates of achievement in all areas of study, it becomes even more important for composition teachers to evaluate whether or not traditional methods of writing instruction help students learn how to write in academic discourse. I use the phrase “write in academic discourse” because I view this kind of writing as a variant form or dialect of Standard American English. Therefore, I will discuss academic writing as only one of many dialects or non-standard
languages. I hope that in referring to academic writing as one of many forms of communication I will help to destabilize the position of power this discourse holds in academia.

This project explores the emerging field of alternative (hybrid) academic discourses. My interest in this research project stems from my own difficulties as a writer attempting to fit in to the world of academia, but it is also grounded in my experiences during two semesters as a graduate teaching assistant at Humboldt State University. But the real inspiration for this project comes from my belief that the teaching of writing needs to encompass much more than traditional instruction in rhetorical strategies, prewriting, drafting, and revision. I believe that if the field of English composition is going to truly prepare students for the diversity of writing tasks they will need to master, then instructors also need to consider the diversity of students they work with and whether teaching academic writing as a survival strategy is the best way to reach the great variety of readers and writers in today’s colleges and universities. I argue for a more inclusive form of composition instruction that recognizes the validity of all dialects and discourses. Hybrid discourse, with its many possibilities for linking students’ own stories and lives with the goals of college writing, can bridge the gap between their voices and academic language.

Alternative Academic Discourse: A Definition

Alternative (hybrid) discourse mixes two distinct writing styles, academic and non-academic, and allows students to write analytical, scholarly texts while utilizing a wide range of rhetorical strategies and subject positions. This form also accepts and recognizes students’ own discourses, their mother tongues; students include their own home language in their texts. Thus, an alternative discourse essay is a blend or hybrid of two different rhetorical and linguistic forms: the students’ and the university’s. Alternative discourse texts are intended for an
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academic audience, but they also transcend academia and are accessible to a wide range of
readers. A body of published alternative academic discourse exists, and there is a broad range of
non-academic literature (fiction and non-fiction) already in print that makes use of a writer’s
home language. While this definition reads, at first, like a recipe for an unreadable mix of
dialects and languages, alternative discourse also grounds student work in a standard form
recognized and understood by academic readers. In short, alternative discourse is not a deviant
or anarchic form of communication. It is an organic and rational type of writing that allows for a
much broader freedom of expression than is possible in standard academic discourse. Its
possibilities for professional publication are also recognized; this project will present many
examples of published alternative discourse texts. For reasons of clarity, I will refer to Standard
American English as SAE, and academic writing as SAW throughout this project.

In order to understand this working definition of alternative discourse, it is necessary to
examine what educators mean by standard academic writing. It should be easy to arrive at a
definition of traditional academic writing. After all, as instructors and students in a college or
university, academic writing is something we are familiar with. Or are we? Is there a concrete
definition of what exactly constitutes SAW? We can consider the standard definition of SAW as
follows: academic writing is objective and generally shows the author’s detachment from her
topic; it presents material in a linear fashion with a thesis statement generally somewhere at the
beginning of the essay, and it contains strong, verifiable support that connects to the thesis
throughout the paper. A standard academic essay is intended primarily for an audience of
scholars. As such, it should be written in SAE and not make use of expletives, slang, or other
non-standard forms of discourse. An academic paper is built on analysis, and this analytical
framework is empirical and rational: there is generally no place in an academic paper for the
writer’s feelings (except in some forms of personal analytical narrative) since feelings will not hold an argument together. Of course, the writer’s opinion is necessary, as long as it is supported by a strong body of evidence. Generally, most academic papers are written in the third-person point of view. This is supposed to allow for a more objective stance than is possible when working with the first-person voice. To write in the second person, except perhaps in works of creative writing, is considered anathema to the rigorous academic inquiry that SAW papers are supposed to present.

After considering both definitions, what I find most interesting about both alternative and academic discourse is that the goals of both forms are essentially equal: both alternative and academic discourse make use of analysis; both forms value rationality, and both are concerned with reaching an academic audience. The main difference is academia’s view of SAE as a grapholect—the coveted language that students must learn to write—and in SAW’s exclusivity to academic readers and their reading styles. Alternative discourse texts and their authors do not recognize one language as better or worse than any other; their blend of rhetorical styles and dialects reaches beyond academic disciplines and can be read by persons with little or no experience in academic writing. Thus, the goals of alternative discourse are global, rather than local; inclusive, rather than exclusive; liberatory, not hegemonic.

Academic writing, much like any other living language, is not static. Patricia Bizzell discusses this quality of SAW in her essay, “The Intellectual Work of Mixed Forms of Academic Discourses”:

Because academic discourse is the language of a human community, it can never be absolutely fixed in form. It changes over time, and at any given time multiple versions of it are in use. In this sense, “alternative” forms of academic discourse
have always been knocking around the academy. Nevertheless, because academic discourse is the language of a community, at any given time its most standard or widely accepted features reflect the cultural preferences of the most powerful people in the community. Until relatively recently, these people in the academic community have usually been male, European American and middle or upper class (1).

In this excerpt, Bizzell discusses a key element of alternative discourse: its possibilities for empowering all students who struggle with the rigors of academic writing by allowing their own subjectivity, ideas, and forms of rhetorical expression to be heard rather than silenced. But Bizzell also recognizes that we should not discuss alternative discourse as an exception to academic writing. Defining alternative and hybrid forms as “exceptions” indicates that SAW has more intellectual and rhetorical validity. This definition literally means mixing non-standard dialects and rhetorical forms with serious academic work. As such, hybrid discourse texts could be viewed as experiments with little or no value in the composition class. Missing from this simple definition, however, are the voices of people in the educational community who are not white, male or of European descent. This simple definition gives a voice to the privileged and silences those students and scholars who are not a part of the dominant white male culture. And yet, more and more students and scholars from traditionally underrepresented groups are joining the academic community; they come from all walks of life; they enter the halls of academia and bring with them their own socio-historical constructions of identity, their stories, their languages, and all the power inherent in their own spoken and written words. For these scholars and students, alternative discourse texts are not just a place to present their ability to code-shift between the dominant discourse and their own dialect. Instead, these new discursive forms allow
students and professors to join in the academic conversation on a level playing field, one in
which all voices and argumentative styles are recognized as legitimate.

The term *alternative discourse* has its roots in the 1974 College Composition and
Communication resolution "The Students' Right to Their Own Language." Although the
resolution does not specify a name for this blended form, it nevertheless explicitly calls for
educators to respect students' various languages and means of expression. It does so in no
uncertain terms, as is evident in the following quotation:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the
dialects of their nurture, or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity
and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard
American dialect has any validity. [Such] a claim leads to false advice for
speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its
diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of
dialects (CCC 1).

This example helps us understand why confusion exists when the words "alternative discourse"
are mentioned in academic circles. The CCC's proposal essentially argues for the usage of any
language or dialect in the writing classroom. This proposal was initially met with quizzical
responses, and rightly so: how will teachers understand their students' work if they are free to
write in whatever language they choose? Although this is a hopeful and inclusive proposal, it is
clear that it would be impossible to conduct a writing class—or any course for that matter—in
which students are free to write in Chinese, Japanese, Gao, Spanish, etc. But to read the CCC's
proposal literally is to miss the spirit of the call for action that these educators embraced in 1974.

These scholars saw the need for a different kind of writing instruction, one that considered
students' own identities and dialects—their home languages. Also, a much more practical purpose existed in drafting this resolution: after many years of theoretical and practical work, writing instructors still wonder how they can improve student writing. In other words, as some scholars argue, the kids still can't write, even in the 21st century, and in a culture that prizes strong analytical and communication skills. This argument, however, is based on the premise that our teaching methods are working, that we are doing all we can to teach students the writing skills they will need in order to be successful. But is it really our students who can't write? Or is it us, the educators and policy makers, who can't teach, who will not listen, who will not change?
Alternative Discourse Pedagogy: Why Should Teachers Embrace Hybrid Forms?

One important reason for allowing students to use their home language in their writing is because this practice closely adheres to the goals of democratic education in a free society. As Peter Elbow argues, “Standard Written English [SAW] is no one’s mother tongue” (326). No one grows up speaking academic English; people do not communicate with each other in a completely objective, linear, hierarchical manner. It is true that “[some of us may have] a mother tongue that is closer to [standard written English] than many others do, but there is still a distance. The words and constructions that come naturally to [our] tongue are often inappropriate for writing, there is still a need to acquiesce—to give in” (Elbow 326). For all of us then, for educated scholars with years of experience writing and publishing academic texts, as well as for first-year students composing an academic paper, using the rhetorical devices and constructions of SAW requires a submission—a letting go—an acceptance of a mode of communication completely foreign to the great majority of us. Knowing this, it is beneficial for
English composition instructors to consider the serious ramifications of their writing assignments. Think, for example, about the argument Keith Fort makes when he writes:

If teachers today were to insist that students reach only conclusions that were acceptable to our political establishment, violent protests would erupt. But when students are forced to use only one form, there is little rebellion although this formal tyranny may result in a more basic conformity than content tyranny.

Perhaps we regard the form of the essay only as a conventional tool that permits communication and believe that the tool itself is meaningless. But forms have their own kind of meaning. Twenty years ago a teacher who conducted a highly rigid lecture class might well have said that his teaching method was “just a convention” that permitted learning. We know better than that now. The form in which a classroom is conducted is related to what is learned and has its own psychological implications in shaping a student’s development. The form of the essay is no more a simple convention than is form in the classroom (173).

In this excerpt, Fort is concerned with the rhetorical form of the standard analytical college essay. I argue that we can extend Fort’s argument of form from the rhetoric and mechanics of writing in SAW to the ideological and symbolic elements embedded in the dominant language of academia. From this perspective, SAW acts as a means for educators to force specific ideologies on their students. SAW enforces the rhetorical forms and language of a very specific community and presents SAE as the only valid discourse within that same community. Yet, as is evident in the increasingly multi-cultural student body of our colleges and universities, diversity is crucial to education. Students look for campuses with diverse student and teacher populations; in many colleges and universities, issues of ethnic and gender diversity are crucial to the work of scholars
and administrators. If universities, and especially composition departments, truly believe in
democratic ideas of diversity, a writing pedagogy that validates only one discourse—one voice—
works against those same democratic principles. Alternative discourse admits many voices and
stories; hybrid composition is thus directly in line with principles of diversity and democracy that
guide today’s educational institutions.

When teachers work with alternative discourse, they extend an invitation for students to
bring their own ideologies and vernaculars to the academic table. They also tap into the comfort
zone of their students, where their best work is often produced. It is difficult to perform
demanding intellectual work if one does not feel comfortable. True, there are many writing
styles, and many of us wait until the last minute to type that essay or that review that was due
yesterday. Even so, how many of us have walked into a class and attempted to teach when we
had not prepared ourselves well? How many of us have tried to write an academic paper that we
hadn’t researched enough? We may be able to write and perform adequately in these kinds of
situations, but we can write better papers and teach better classes only if we are well prepared,
and only if we feel comfortable with what it is that we’re trying to say or attempting to write.

Alternative discourse can make this level of comfort accessible to all students. Comfort
implies safety—the feeling that we are in a space where we do not have to fear ridicule or pain.
Our home dialect or language is whatever voice we feel is most natural; it is the voice we use
when speaking with our friends and loved ones. It is this voice that we associate with our
childhood, with experiences that are concrete, rather than abstract. As Peter Elbow suggests,
writing well is synonymous with comfort, and without some level of comfort writing tasks
become unproductive:
Most people cannot really feel at home writing, and cannot use writing as naturally as speaking, unless they are taught to write in their home voice—that is, in whatever language comes naturally to hand and mouth. People can't learn to write well unless they write a great deal and with some pleasure, and they can't do that unless they feel writing to be as comfortable as an old shoe—something they can slip into naturally and without pinching” (Elbow 326).

Elbow’s comments make a lot of sense when we consider that it is difficult to perform a complicated task without knowing what is required to do the work. Therefore, if we expect students to write analytically, and if we want them to produce large amounts of objective, rational and well-thought out writing, we must first teach them how to feel safe, how to write using their own language so they will not be afraid of tackling such a complex writing task (326).

In a process-oriented composition class, an instructor’s main objective is to create a “community of writers.” This is an important element of composition theory; this phrase is also used by writing instructors as an affirmation of our belief in democratic and inclusive theories of writing. We want to believe that we are, in effect, creating a community of writers. But it is difficult to have any real sense of group solidarity when many of the voices that could enrich our communities are silenced so that the dominant voice can have its say. While alternative discourse assignments are not meant to be a foolproof solution to students’ struggles with academic writing, these emerging forms of composition support the community and process approach to writing instruction in concrete rather than purely theoretical ways.

Teaching Alternative Discourse

How should writing instructors approach the teaching of alternative discourse? This is a question Winston Weathers grappled with in the 1980’s. His description of alternative discourse
pedagogy based on the explicit teaching of rhetorical and linguistic principles is an early attempt by a professional scholar to challenge composition instruction methods. In his book, *Alternate Style: Options in Composition*, Weathers critiques teaching practices that enforce adherence to standard rhetorical forms. Reading his text today, it is interesting to note that current traditional rhetoric never really went away. Instead, the old composition instruction methods have been repackaged in a new box, one that may look different because its content has changed, but the framework, the structure of teaching this new content is the same: a box. Process writing pedagogies emphasizing multiple drafts, revision, and peer response sessions all do little to change the fact that writing educators do not generally stray from the forms and conventions of the standard academic essay. Weathers observes that composition instructors tend to “stay within the safe confines of a ‘grammar of style,’ a [configuration] within which our options are related one to another, all basically kin, none of which takes us outside a certain approved and established area” (5). Seen in this light, process theories of writing do not appear as liberating as they once did, since they emphasize adherence to the dominant discourse’s traditional rhetorical forms.

What went wrong? The process approach was supposed to democratize writing classes: by deemphasizing adherence to strict grammar and literature (theme) instruction, students would learn the value of peer feedback and would also understand that writing is a process that takes time and effort to master. In a process-oriented class, writers supposedly gained an understanding of their audience’s importance to their written texts. Reading, pre-writing, and drafting were recognized as critical steps in the production of any text. Although these are sound pedagogical practices, in the end, not all teachers discarded the old themes or methods of
teaching writing. Student writers are still evaluated on their ability (or lack thereof) to craft essays that fit into the box of academic writing.

Like Keith Fort, Weathers recognizes the need to question this adherence to past—and current—practices of teaching composition. Even though many of the teaching methods used in composition classrooms today are different than those used in the past, the dominant discourse continues to be taught as the only valid rhetorical voice in academia. Weathers recognizes that, since writing educators desire to help their students succeed, it is critical to embrace new ways of teaching composition:

[Anything] that looms on the horizon as a distinctly different possibility we generally attack as 'bad writing' or identify as 'creative writing which we don't teach in this class' or ignore altogether, claiming it is a possibility that only rare persons (like James Joyce or Gertrude Stein) could do anything with and that ordinary mortals should scrupulously avoid. Yet there it is. The beast sniffing outside the door. And ultimately we must deal with it. It is, of course, another grammar/community of style, another set of conventions and criteria, another way of writing that offers yet more options and offers us yet further possibilities for rhetorical adaptations and adjustments. [This new mixed form is] a mature and alternate (not experimental) style used by competent writers and offering students of writing a well-tested set of options that, added to [traditional forms] will give them a much more flexible voice, a much greater communication capacity, a much greater opportunity to put into effective language all the things they have to say (8).
As Weathers suggests, alternative discourse pedagogy encourages students to put their own home discourses and socio-historical backgrounds to work within the context of rigorous academic writing. This collision of discourses is necessary for the analytical level of thinking and writing necessary for academic success. As composition teachers, we aim to teach students how to read and think critically. But when students have to follow decades-old examples of "good" and "correct" academic writing, how much critical thinking is really going on? To merely copy an example does not require a great degree of critical thinking. But we do use critical thinking when we analyze why we are writing a text, or how that text is constructed, and how some writing genres differ from other forms of written communication. Alternative discourse brings to light hidden elements of SAW: when students contrast their home language to the dominant discourse they begin a process of analysis that, rather than mere copying, encourages a deeper understanding of the differences and similarities of academic and non-academic genres.

In order to challenge old assumptions and rhetorical forms, Weathers draws heavily from literature and creative writing to illustrate how a new, alternative form of academic writing—a Grammar B—can be taught in the writing classroom. Weathers clearly sees the need for a more expressive rhetoric, a style that allows students to discuss issues in ways not available to them in the discourse of academic writing. Like Jeffrey Maxson, Weathers values playfulness in language as a means of deconstructing the standard academic writing style. In essence, Weathers' argument agrees with Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of intertextuality and multiple voices in the novel. As suggested in "Discourse in the Novel," literary prose contains a multiplicity of voices: the author's, readers, and characters in the text. In the novel, different voices and ideologies conflict with each other, play with each other, and contribute to the reader's
understanding of the text. The novel, more than any other medium, is the perfect example of
heteroglossia, of multiple voices, not just the author’s, influencing a text. For Bakhtin, there is
not one writer or one voice, but many writers and many voices (262-263). Because the novel is a
good example of multiple voices, using literature as a means of teaching alternative discourse
agrees with process writing pedagogies that value audience awareness and student peers’
contributions to works-in-progress. Although Weathers’ discusses alternative discourse using
examples from Western literature and rhetoric, there is no reason why writing instructors could
not use other English texts from the Asian and African diasporas, for example, or any other form
of literature as examples for contrasting academic discourse with other texts. Thus, the
definition of a text can be expanded to include audio/visual texts, graphic novels, poems, or web-based media. Weathers uses various examples of alternative discourse including the
incorporation of lists and personal writing into academic essays. A key insight here is that
alternative and professional writing has always been with us, from literary fiction, to shopping
lists, to the business letter, as evidenced by Weathers’ example of a letter written by Ambrose
Bierce in 1913 (48):

Editor 'Lantern,'

Will I tell you what I think of your magazine? Sure I will.

It was thirty-six pages of reading matter.

Seventeen are given to the biography of a musician, --German, dead.

Four to the mother of a theologian, --German, peasant-wench, dead.

[Five] pages about Eugene Field's ancestors. All dead.

17+4+5=26.

36-26=10
Two pages about Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

Three fourths of a page about a bad poet and his indifference to—German.

Two pages of his poetry.

\[2 + 3 + 4 + 2 = 4 \frac{3}{4}\]

\[10 - 4 \frac{3}{4} = 5 \frac{1}{4}\]. Not enough to criticize.

What your magazine needs is an editor—presumably older, preferably American, and indubitably alive. At least awake. It is your inning.

Sincerely yours,

Ambrose Bierce

In this example, the standard business letter becomes an alternate form, or as Weathers suggests, a “Grammar B.” This writer (Bierce) “broke through the conventions of a [standard business] letter in order to express himself more fully and effectively” (Weathers 48). Weathers also observes that many forms of writing are essentially alternative: invitations to an event or a party, journal writing, shopping lists. These alternative forms are nothing new, nor are they difficult to understand, yet they are not written in SAE. In fact, as Weathers suggests, “We’d hate to be so stuck with [standard] invitations (extending or receiving) that we’d miss out on (extending or receiving) these [non-standard] invitations. That is, we’d hate for all our lunches to be the same—all articulated with [SAE] steadiness and air conditioning, we wouldn’t mind running over to the Ritz some noon with warm [alternative] expectations” (47). The humor in this passage underscores an important point, and one that I will refer to again in this project: no one speaks in SAE. If this is the case, the mixing of dialects or non-standard forms with academic discourse should not be seen as counterproductive to academic work, since we can also agree
that not all published work, and certainly not all academic work, is written using only the
conventions of SAE.

An example of this lack of standard conventions is a recent essay by Laura Lai Long. Published two decades after Weathers’ book, Long’s example of a professional alternative
discourse essay follows the format of an unconventional “Grammar B.” Long’s text, “Full (dis)
course Meal: Some Words on Hybrid/Alternative Discourses,” is written as both an analytic
personal narration and a menu: she uses her recollections of her family’s cooking as a context
from which to critically examine the dominant discourse of academia as well as hybrid/mixed
writing forms:

The eve of 2000. A scholar changes her mind. Significant. Composition scholar
and social constructionist Patricia Bizzell addresses her colleagues in a
Composition Studies article entitled ‘Hybrid Academic Discourses: What, Why,
How.’ Modifications on teaching tradition, a standard. I would no longer want to
defend a pedagogical position that sees its inculcation as a one-way street
(Bizzell 1999, 8). Concession that defining ‘academic discourse’ is more
complex than earlier realized (Bizzell 1999, 8). Standards can be revised,
tradition can be broken, and the dress code for writing redefined. Perhaps soon,
all will be welcome (Long 141) Emphasis hers.

Long’s fragmented prose in this paragraph, combined with her unorthodox blending of in-text
citations, is an example of her essay as a whole: it uses fragments because its author feels
fragmented. A woman of mixed ethnic background, Long wants readers to understand that she is
not easy to categorize or define. In fact, the one definition she uses at the beginning of her essay
is that of chop suey, meaning “various pieces.” Long describes her cultural background as a
mixture of different pieces, “Four languages, spoken over the phone with Auntie Marcie. ‘Mixed together’ Maman would say. ‘Like chop suey’” (139). Later in her essay, Long lists a series of texts that may be used to generate hybrid discourses: the list is arranged like a menu and includes letters, comic books, journals, graffiti, drawings, etc. After introducing her menu of possibilities for mixed writing forms, Long concludes with a short note: “Home cookin’ is all about finding the ingredients in your own backyard. The ocean as text. The city as text.

Reading the countryside. Please note: students are literate in different ways without being aware of it. Plucking words from our gardens” (151) Emphasis hers. She also cautions us to “beware of ‘take-out’ food: fiction as opposed to essay or nonfiction writing as dialect/language models” (152). This is because when students only see their home dialects represented in works of fiction, those same representations influence their perspectives of their vernaculars and mother tongues: home dialects are useful in common dialogue, but are not valid for argumentative academic work (Long 152). What Long is arguing for is a broader scope of what literature means. She encourages educators to use traditional literary texts as idea-generating tools for the teaching of alternative academic discourse, but she also calls for other texts and contexts, for the unconventional to be used as a background for academic discourse. She brings Weathers’ argument into the scope of the twenty-first century, a time when we have unlimited resources at our disposal to examine a multitude of texts, and to use this examination as a basis for analyzing the dominant discourses of SAE and SAW.

An Argument Against Alternative Discourse

In order to fully explore alternative discourses and their liberatory possibilities, it is necessary to consider arguments against these new rhetorical forms. For writing instructors working in the process-oriented composition class, alternative discourses may seem like a good
idea. However, we must acknowledge that these new forms of writing may not work for all students, nor will they be helpful in every situation. Much like any other educational tool, writing teachers cannot expect one pedagogical technique to solve each and every problem in their classrooms. But, if one of the goals of the writing class in particular, and university education in general is to teach students how to think critically, then alternative discourse assignments can be a useful way for instructors to model the differences and similarities between academic discourse and students’ own vernaculars.

One extreme critique of alternative discourse, however, is presented by Sidney I. Dobrin in his essay, “A Problem with Writing (about) ‘Alternative’ Discourse.” According to Dobrin, a discussion about hybrid forms should not be taking place in the academy:

“To discuss hybrid discourses is to enact a meta-discourse that is wholly academic and functions to label, identify and codify ‘alternative’ discourses not as equivalent to academic discourse, but as alternative to the accepted discourse. Think, for instance, about how the phrase ‘alternative lifestyles’ is perceived, the notion not only of difference, but often of inferiority, deviance as well. To discuss alternative discourse as a discourse of difference [although other scholars] move to show why such alternative discourses are being and should be accepted, as discourse different from academic discourse, in some ways does disservice to and violence to the nonacademic portions of the hybrid (45-46).

Dobrin is concerned here with the labeling of an alternative discourse as an other, or as a language that is deficient or not as literate or intellectual as the dominant discourse. Like Dobrin, I am also concerned about offering a very strict definition or label of alternative discourse, and I do understand his suggestion that, if educators persist in labeling this form of
writing as a hybrid or alternative to the dominant discourse, they may be doing a disservice to students’ own languages. In other words, by labeling some discourses as alternative and others as academic, are educators doing the opposite of what they intend?

If we follow Dobrin’s argument to its conclusion, however, its implications become more difficult to understand:

[I believe that] we may be risking silencing and neutralizing a good number of discourses when they interact with academic discourse. To make a push to include more forms of hybrid or mixed discourses is certainly important, [but] I think it is crucial that we carefully examine the total ramifications of such work. [I am also] not sure I agree with discussions of alternative discourses, [since] all discourses are hybrid and discourse itself is not codifiable in any way that can lend to identifying what is alternative and what isn’t. I’m concerned with the agenda for creating such a conversation because of the potentially silencing outcome for [students’ home] discourses (Dobrin 54).

While Dobrin is correct in suggesting that all discourses and languages are, in essence, hybrids—language change is a constant aspect of any language—I do not agree with an argument that claims any discussion of alternative discourses will lead to the silencing of students’ own home languages. On the contrary, scholars who work with hybrids and alternative forms know that when students use alternative discourse they are actually performing an analysis of the dominant, academic discourse while recognizing the validity of other vernaculars and languages. If writing instructors never discuss other vernaculars in their class, and if they never use blended assignments for fear of silencing students’ home discourses, they are actually reinforcing such a silencing. A discussion of alternative discourses exists because professional educators have
begun to question their own teaching practices and those of others; they realize that in order for students to understand academic language, teachers must begin to present it as a foreign tongue, as an alien discourse that is used in the academic community but not necessarily elsewhere. Alternative discourses can help open students up to questions of language: by contrasting slang or home languages to the rigid academic style, students are able to see the rhetorical functions inherent in the dominant discourse. Without that contrasting element—alternative vs. academic—the dominant discourse is presented as the only language that matters, as superior, more intellectual, and more rule-driven than other, non-academic discourses. Dobrin is correct in suggesting that labeling discourses with tags—alternative, hybrid—creates its own set of problems. This is true of any labels we attach to persons, ideas, or even Standard American English (What’s non-standard?). But engaging in this sort of reasoning leads to a circular argument: for lack of better terms, for better or for worse, we need a label to refer to an object, an idea, or in this case, a discourse, if only so that we don’t have to use the word “it” or “thing.” The very real silencing that happens in the writing class is when this idea of different discourses is not discussed for fear of “erasing” the parent language. In a class about writing—about written language—it is crucial to discuss language in real and honest terms: a dominant academic discourse and Standard American English do exist. But the fact that these discourses exist is even more of a reason to invite students to explore non-standard forms of writing, so that they can contrast their own languages with those of the academy, and in order to underscore the equal linguistic value of academic discourse and students’ home language. More and more professional educators are finding in alternative discourse a challenge worth exploring—and worth discussing. For this discussion not to take place would be a very real injury, both for students and educators.
Excellent examples of published alternative discourse writing are found within the repertoire of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) literature, both academic and non-academic. I use AAVE here only as an example and because I am most familiar with the use of alternative discourse in the context of AAVE. However, any dialect, such as Chicano English or Appalachian English can be used in order to craft powerful alternative discourse texts. As noted earlier, one of the liberatory goals of alternative discourse pedagogy is to clarify the fact that there is not one correct language or dialect, but many. AAVE is extremely helpful when discussing alternative discourses, primarily because it continues to be labeled as poor or inferior writing within the academy.

As an example of AAVE's stigmatized image, we can look at one university's developmental writing class: Humboldt State University's English 40, Writing Confidence/Intensive Learning. This is a no-credit, developmental writing course designed to help students achieve a level of confidence in writing that will allow them to attend the for-
credit, English 100 course. African American students enrolled in this course may excel in other areas that require analytical and critical thinking, for example, science, mathematics, and nursing. But these same students lack the analytical and rhetorical skills needed for entry into regular, for-credit English writing classes. At least, that is what their placement test scores tell the university administrators who dictate enrollment into English 40. These students’ language, then, must lack some element crucial to good academic writing: organization of ideas, development and support of a thesis, and a basic understanding of SAE grammar, spelling, and punctuation skills. If these students are to succeed in the academy, then the academy must help them by teaching the survival skills they need to complete their two-year or four-year college coursework. This is necessary, since it is clear from their English placement tests and their poor writing skills that these students will not succeed in their academic careers.

But the bigger issue here is not whether AAVE speakers have good college writing skills or not. After all, many white, Asian, and European students have poor writing skills as well. The bigger question is how should the academy teach these low-performing students academic writing skills? If the answer is a simple “Learn this,” then the process of teaching academic writing to all students will be what it always has been: a struggle among individual educators to teach their version of good writing. These same educators will continue to raise their eyebrows when presented with the typical undergraduate essay, and the same, decades-old question will be repeated: “Why can’t Jane and Johnny write?” I argue that a primary reason for students’ difficulties with academic writing is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to learn a foreign language or dialect if it is not explained thoroughly and carefully. It is also more difficult to learn a foreign tongue if we have no point of comparison to use for learning this new language, and if we can’t understand how one language’s grammar compares to another.
It is true that up to puberty children can easily learn a new language. But it is also true that after the teenage years language acquisition skills decrease. Adults can certainly learn a foreign language, even if it is badly taught. They will, however, speak and write this same language with an accent, and they will make mistakes. If we consider academic writing as a different discourse—as the foreign language it is—we can see that the same rules of language acquisition for adults apply: teach a language only on a surface level, without explaining its grammar, and students will not fully understand it.

A better way to teach a foreign language is to explain its grammatical forms, to take into consideration the specifics of what makes that language work the way it does, and to compare its grammar to the student’s home language. However, most English composition instruction today, even in process-oriented classes, relies on helping students assimilate the dominant discourse of academia. Writing classes do not generally provide students opportunities to compare their own vernaculars to SAW, or to experiment with SAW by writing essays in hybrid forms. And the fact is, for undergraduate students starting out on their college careers, academic discourse is an entirely new language loaded with signs they have not yet learned to interpret. For this reason, process-oriented courses generally include some measure of genre analysis in order to help students understand academic writing. For example, the argumentative essay is explained: it must have a thesis and supporting points, and the writer should avoid logical fallacies. Or the genre of humanities essays may be compared to essays in the hard sciences. However, it is still not common for students to write an argumentative essay mixing elements of their own home language and its rhetorical elements with the standard academic discourse. And yet, mixing the two forms may allow students who otherwise would have difficulties understanding the salient
features of SAW an opportunity to break it apart and examine it in comparison to the way they communicate with their friends and families.

AAVE speakers and writers evidence the difficulties first-year students face when trying to understand the language of academia. In *Talkin’ and Testifyin’*, Geneva Smitherman asserts that since the 1960’s the educational community has increased its efforts to correct African American students’ language. Educational programs such as Upward Bound, Higher Horizons, and Higher Potential aimed to help low-performing African American students achieve success, both in school and beyond the world of academia. But inherent in these assistance efforts was the idea that something was lacking in African American students’ language abilities. Many AAVE speakers did not write or speak in Standard American English; therefore, a need arose for cultural and educational improvement programs (Smitherman 202). All of this was meant to be helpful. But was it? Smitherman’s book was published in 1977. Today, after decades of social and educational uplift efforts, many African American students are still considered largely underprepared in writing SAE and SAW texts. The reason, however, that AAVE speakers are generally considered deficient in academic writing skills is because they are attempting to enter into a conversation that has not been fully explained. These students are in the process of encountering a new language with its own, very specific rhetorical rules.

In fact, African American students who live in a community with a strong AAVE tradition have to perform what amounts to a translation of the dominant discourse into their own home dialect. As any student of a foreign language or dialect knows, this is hard work, much more difficult than speaking a home dialect without the need to translate. Thus, African American students—if they have been raised in a home and a community where AAVE is spoken—come into the writing classroom with strong analytical skills, since they have learned
how to take apart a different discourse (SAE) in order to make sense out of its construction and rhetorical elements. Speaking or writing in AAVE, therefore, does not assume a lack of analytical or rhetorical skills. AAVE is a highly rhetorical and persuasive dialect, one that relies on call and response, group consciousness and word play. If writing instructors know how to tap into the rhetorical elements of AAVE, and if they are willing to invite their students to write in mixed forms, then they can create a classroom environment that will do more to help students succeed than all the social and educational assimilation programs of the past 50 years.

But teaching African American students how to write in SAW as a means of survival—as a necessary element of academic success—is not enough. In fact, even approaching the teaching of writing in this way can be damaging, because this suggests all that students need to do in order to succeed is speak like white people. According to Geneva Smitherman:

Schools, curricula, language teaching policies and classroom practice are not autonomous entities, nor do they exist in a sociocultural vacuum. Rather, they are interrelated with and governed by the pervasive political and economic ideology of America. Talking about Black English, listing its features and suggesting ways of changing or adding to it, without commensurately advocating changes in the sociopolitical system in which black people struggle is not only short-sighted, is amounts to so much pure academic talk, and ultimately, is an implicit acknowledgement that the system is good and valid, and all that need be done is to alter the people to fit into it. Yet the history of Black people has shown what continues to be true today: speaking White English is no guarantee to economic advancement. For educators, linguists, and anybody else to push that notion off on kids is a gross lie (207).
In other words, students will not be successful only because they speak and write in the standard discourse, especially if they do not understand why it is a standard in the first place, or what makes it the dominant form of written communication. Teaching SAE and SAW as the only appropriate or valid discourses disregards the fact that students’ own vernaculars do matter to them. There are many reasons—not just writing and speaking skills—that position African Americans, women, other minorities, and some white persons lower on the success scale. In the preceding quotation, substitute the words Black with any other ethnic term, imagine that Smitherman wrote this in 2009, and her argument is still valid. There is more to success than just a good command of SAE or SAW. It is a given that good writing and speaking skills can help us be successful—we all need to “play the game” correctly in a job interview, for example—but these skills do not have built-in guarantees. This is not to say that writing teachers should be expected to cover each and every element of students’ education that will lead to their success in school and beyond. Teachers, however, can provide opportunities for the discussion of language; they can work with genre analysis, and they can assign alternative discourse assignments so that their students can learn that their words—their home languages—have the same possibilities for rhetorical expression as academic language and SAE.

Considering SAW in relation to other dialects and vernaculars is not only practical (students may gain a better understanding of the academic writing genre) but also, as in the case of AAVE writers, it is a way for teachers to respect the cultural traditions of their students. Teachers of writing recognize that we deal in powerful ideas: words are not only words on a page; they are instruments that can shape how we perceive others and the world around us. Similarly, words (on a resume, a transcript, etc.) determine how others will see us, and how they will judge us accordingly. For this reason, when educators merely hand their students a “to do”
list of academic writing—do this, then do that, and after you’re done, do that and you’ll have written your paper—they are not considering the effect of their teaching strategy on their students. Geneva Smitherman argues that:

Reality is not merely socially, but socio-linguistically constructed. Real-world experience and phenomena do not exist in some raw, undifferentiated form.

Rather, reality is always filtered, apprehended, encoded, codified, and conveyed via some linguistic shape. [While] Humboldtian linguists (and most Whorfians, for that matter) overstate the case for language as the determiner of thought, consciousness and behavior, nonetheless, language does play a dominant role in the formation of ideology, consciousness, and class relations. As Voloshinov put it, ‘ideology is revealed in a word’ (1929, 70). Thus, my contention is that consciousness and ideology are largely the products of what I will call the sociolinguistic construction of reality (Smitherman 1991, pg 4).

Smitherman wrote these words in an essay that discusses the semantic shift of the terms “Black” and “African American” in the 20th century. Her argument, however, can be applied beyond a discussion of terms describing a particular ethnic group: African American people who speak and write AAVE have a dialect that is their own, no one else’s. Their histories, ideologies, and beliefs are embedded in the words and rhythms of AAVE, just as socio-historical constructions are part of any other language or dialect. If educators disregard AAVE and treat it as slang—as a language that does not fit into the academy—they are doing more harm than good. This is akin to telling students that although their language is a rich depository of cultural history and tradition, what really matters is their ability to assimilate and co-opt Standard American English and its academic counterpart.
Both of these dominant discourses are necessary for success in school and in the workplace. All of us who have ever applied for a job know the importance of a concise, grammatically correct cover letter. We know that if our written communications with prospective employers or with clients are not composed in the standard language, we run the risk of not getting a job, or we may be criticized—and perhaps lose our position—because of our inability to type letters, reports, or other documents in SAE. Because this is true, a general argument against the teaching of hybrid discourse is, “Why should we spend time allowing students to write in their own vernaculars when they won’t be able to use those same vernaculars to get a job or stay in school?” This argument, however, attempts to address two completely different issues and combines them into one. The fact that SAE and SAW are standard discourses is not being disputed in this project, nor is the necessity of employing these discourses in school or the workplace being questioned. Prospective employees know that they cannot show up to a job interview smoking a cigarette and wearing soiled, torn clothes. Similarly, during a job interview, it is expected that the person being interviewed will use at least some of the conventions of SAE. When we meet a prospective employer for the first time, the social context of this initial meeting requires that we do not address her or him as follows: “Hey, wassup man! Like, I’m ready to go, let’s start this shit now so I don’t have to be here all day.” Knowing how to communicate in a given context is part of understanding the social conventions of society. Students know this. By the time they get to college, they do not need to be told that a getting a job depends on their ability to make a good impression on a prospective employer. Some students may have had more experience than others in this kind of social situation, but all students understand that certain social contexts demand adherence to specific rules of dress and behavior.
Just as they are aware of the social and linguistic norms attached to the job interview context, students know that academic writing is different, somehow, than the dialects and languages they speak at home. Students understand that the way they address their instructors in the classroom is different from the way they talk with their friends or family. The goal of hybrid discourse in the writing classroom, therefore, is to allow for an open discussion of the power of language to transform our view of society and individuals within that society, to honor students’ own vernaculars by allowing them an academic space in which to use their home languages, and to teach elements of analysis by using languages that may be more familiar to students than SAW.

An example of how alternative discourse can be applied in the writing classroom is Jeffrey Maxson’s work with parodies and translations of academic language. As Maxson explains, “In the sections of the course I teach, I take the circumstances of students’ placement there as an opportunity to focus the reading and writing on the difference between students’ informal vernaculars and the formal languages of the academy” (25). Maxson highlights one of his student’s translations of an SAE text—a very well-known text—the Gettysburg Address. This example, however, is not a blend of academic language and a home dialect; it is a parody and translation of an official standard discourse:

I dunno it was something like eighty seven years ago when these old guys brought here in dis country a new place that began bein free and were sayin all this shit like dat that all da people in dis fuckin country are all equal or some shit like dat. Now we be in dis civil war shit to see how long we can keep up dis fighting shit. Dis right here on dis grass where da fightin was is where we be today. We gonna give dis shit to be the fuckin cemetery for the stupid motha fuckas who were
stupid enough to come out here with guns and shit and start killin each other like it was some kind of gang war or some shit like dat yo. I mean, What da dilly yo, who wants to go out and shoot each other, you know what I’m sayin? (28)

Maxson argues that this student’s text is successful because it places him in a subject position in which he can critique—make fun of—standard English. Although “[the student] misrepresents Lincoln’s intent in the middle of the speech, [Lincoln] didn’t consider those who died at Gettysburg to be stupid m.f.’s but rather ‘those who gave their lives that the nation might live,’ [this parody of the Gettysburg Address] presents a commonplace within public discourse on gang violence: that gang fighters are only hurting themselves, that their rage is misplaced, etc.” (29). Thus, this student performs above and beyond the requirements of the original assignment: he not only translates Lincoln’s text from SAE into his own home dialect, but he utilizes the opportunity to use a less-formal vernacular in order to insert a critique of violence in present-day society while contrasting it with the violence of war.

Maxson uses alternative discourse assignments in his classes so that students can deconstruct the highly formal language of academia in order to analyze and understand it. As he explains, “in class we talk about how academic culture privileges scientific ways of knowing, and how this leads to a peculiar kind of writing: full of discipline-specific jargon and concepts, hedging of statements, [statistical] rather than anecdotal evidence, [and] an almost obsessive documentation (ostensibly so that readers may arrive at the same conclusions as the writer) (25). In this way, Maxson does not merely tell his students to write correctly. Instead, he helps his students discover why SAW is different than their own home languages. As part of his work with alternative discourse, Maxson also encourages students to submit texts rendered not only in home dialects and slang, but also in electronic communication language (CMC), for
example, “an excerpt from a biology text on natural selection rendered in the language of Instant Messenger” (28). Since today’s students live in a world saturated with technology and Internet social networking sites, the possibilities of alternative discourse can extend beyond traditional dialects and languages to the new, electronic and multimedia formats made possible by the World Wide Web.

Although alternative discourse assignments are not commonly taught in college and university writing classrooms, the idea that such a curriculum makes sense and should be considered is not new, as evidenced by Winston Weathers’ work as well as Geneva Smitherman’s arguments in *Teachin’ and Testifyin’*. As Smitherman correctly suggests, students’ home languages—in this case, AAVE—offer a greater and more complex degree of expression than is possible in a SAW text. The standard language of academia may not be enough to help these students truly speak their minds, but their own vernaculars do have a power that the dominant discourse lacks (231). As I have suggested before, Smitherman’s argument and the principles of alternative discourse can be applied not only to speakers and writers of AAVE, but also to any student, whether female or male and of any ethnicity. Since no one speaks in SAE or writes strictly in SAW, the lessons that alternative discourse teaches can be valuable to students across all cultural boundaries. Alternative discourse assignments are clearly not a magic solution that will teach all students the elements of academic writing, but they are a valuable educational tool. And alternative discourse can and does work in the academic setting, as Smitherman has proven: her text is written as a blend of SAW and AAVE.

If writing educators can show their students why academic discourse is different from their own vernaculars, then the standard discourse begins to look and sound and feel more like the outsider dialect that it truly is: SAE is not the language of America; it is not the preferred
form of communication of millions of citizens in this country, whether African American, white, oriental or Hispanic. SAE is the dominant written language in the United States—the prestige dialect—but it is not a language of common use. Neither is SAW the common form of writing for these same millions of Americans. These are just two social dialects to which we hold an unspoken and unwritten agreement: we will use them for ease of communication in specific cultural contexts. These standard languages, however, may not always provide the best means for our students to communicate or learn.
Double-Voicedness, AAVE, and Alternative Discourse

As educators consider arguments for and against the inclusion of alternative discourse in the writing classroom, it is important to keep in mind that SAE, SAW, and students' home languages do not have to stand in direct opposition to one another. In fact, as evidenced by Mikhail Bakthin’s theory of double-voicedness, these two very distinct discourses “[serve] two speakers at the same time and [express] simultaneously two different intentions” (324). That is, although two different languages have different ideologies and rhetorical elements, the two languages are not static and exclusive. Instead, these two languages are always in a dialogic relationship with each other; they serve the purpose of each speaker while they maintain their own discursive elements. Students bring their own experiences and ideas to the reading and writing of any SAE and SAW text and they are similarly influenced by the texts themselves. Bakhtin suggests double-voiced discourse is a “conversation [between two languages that] know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other” (324). This view makes it difficult to consider academic writing on one end of a continuum with all other languages on
the opposite end, since language continually changes and all of our discussions, writings, and arguments are influenced by other texts we read or hear.

AAVE is therefore a good example for studying the efficacy of hybrid forms of writing and it also allows us to conceptualize Bakhtin’s ideas of double-voicedness, heteroglossia and hybridity. The reasons for this are AAVE’s stigma as a deficient form of language for the purposes of academic communication, and the implications of reinforcing notions of “correct” English in culturally diverse 21st century college classrooms. AAVE is also a good subject of study because of the incorrect belief that alternative and hybrid forms of writing do not exist, and that there is only a minimal body of hybrid academic writing texts. The exact opposite is true.

When we consider the growth of the English language, from its beginnings as a low vernacular to its current status as a world language, we begin to see that alternative discourses have always been around. As Carol D. Lee asserts:

> Literature, from almost any historical or national tradition, quite often involves hybridity. In [medieval] England, Chaucer used the vernacular English, instead of Latin, and created characters who critiqued the dominant discourses of his era (e.g., the Pardoner of the Canterbury Tales). [Centuries later,] Toni Morrison (1984) says she tries to create a language stage that invites the reader to stand up and shout, to get the Holy Ghost, just as the parishioner answers the preacher’s call with an emphatic response in the Black church (133).

Lee’s examples remind us that hybrid forms of writing are not new. What is consistent through time, however, is the idea that only the standard language is an acceptable or correct form of communication. Educators, sometimes unknowingly, may concur with the incorrect belief that
SAE and SAW are acceptable and every other discourse is not, even though there is a body of written work that does not support this argument.

In fact, when the vernaculars are taken out of language and literature, we are left with something tasteless, something lacking. It is when we take the so-called deficient languages out of English that we lose what makes English so rich and complex. Lee explains that Alice Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple*, uses AAVE extensively for rhetorical effect. Its protagonist, Celie, speaks with an accent that is necessary to convey the spirit and power of Rachel (Alice Walker’s step-grandmother, whom Celie’s character is based on). If the book was written without any AAVE constructions, Rachel (and Celie) would be effectively erased; avoiding their home language in favor of a standard would suppress not only their words, but their history and perspectives (133). Lee studied AAVE in the context of literary response; she worked in an underachieving high school serving low-performing students with low reading scores. The majority of her students used AAVE to communicate. Although her students had been designated as developmental, their ability to critically read complex texts was not consistent with their low reading scores (Lee 129). Lee discovered that the use of AAVE did not keep students from grappling with difficult and challenging literature, nor did the use of this vernacular have a negative effect on their ability to critically examine both written and visual texts.

By using AAVE to express their ideas, students in Lee’s class were able to not only critically examine works of literature; they also engaged in a critique of the dominant discourse and their own home languages. This engagement with the texts through non-academic language echoes Bakhtinian ideas of double-voiced discourse and *carnivalesque*. As Lee explains:

> [Students] engage in literary reasoning while satirizing the very playfulness of such reasoning. [More] often than not, critique of the disciplines into which they
are being apprenticed (at least theoretically) requires a resistance that leads to problems, low grades, discipline referrals, etc. In this case, the discipline itself invites a playful resistance and the social language of AAVE privileges such playfulness. It is an interesting marriage, or at least courting, that I had not considered before (138).

One of Lee’s in-class assignments involved watching a short film, “Sax Cantor Riff.” This film depicts the story of a young African American woman who sings to her dying mother inside a subway station. Scenes in the short film are replete with African American social imagery.

After watching the film in class, Lee asked students to deconstruct it. Although she expected her students to conform to her own expectations as an instructor, she found that her class did the opposite: they performed a critical analysis of the film by using their own languages and African American oral and historical traditions. When Lee asks her students questions like, “Is there any history [to the song in the film?]” (136) she is looking for a response that discusses specific historical details of the narrative. But as Lee further explains, “the students, in contrast, evoke an ‘unofficial’ script and construct [their own] narrative to warrant their claims: “That’s her mother’s favorite song,” or “Her mama probably sang it to her, and her grandmother sang it to her, and her grandmother’s grandmamma sang it to her” (137). Thus, the students respond from an African American perspective that emphasizes the roles of family and women’s lineage in society, whereas the academic perspective emphasizes historical and ethnic roles.

Similarly, when the discussion turns to a train that passes by as the young woman finishes her song, students identify the train with death—the young woman’s mother just died—and they respond by ventriloquation—by usage of ideas they’ve read and heard before—and from an African American perspective: “That’s her mother passing on,” “The train is on its way home.”
Consistent with Bakhtin’s theory, these students are involved in a dialogue with one language (the teacher’s official academic script) but they are also able to understand and respond to that dominant discourse with their own African American vernacular.

According to Bakhtin’s argument, there can be no double-voiced discourse without hybridity. Hybrid discourse is an inherent part of double-voicedness; any two languages must be discussed in their relation to each other, in their dialogism. Bakhtin suggests that hybridization in language can be either intentional and deliberate (for example, Weathers’ and Maxson’s alternative discourse texts) or unintentional (as in Lee’s in-class work). Intentional use of alternative writing forms is important because it situates students in a position from which they can understand the specific elements of academic discourse. But unintentional hybridization, however, is even more important. Bakhtin explains:

Language and languages change historically primarily by means of hybridization, by means of a mixing of various ‘languages’ co-existing within the boundaries of a single dialect, a single national language, a single branch, a single group of different branches in the historical as well as paleontological past of languages—but the crucible for this mixing always remains the utterance (359).

Bakhtin is concerned with history, primarily, as well as the interconnectedness of all language. And history matters in communication: when students respond to texts, they do so with their own ideas and perspectives—with their own histories—enriched by interactions with their families and their culture. Their ideas and ways of responding to texts are also influenced by their teachers and by the official dominant discourse of SAE and the academy.

What is most important about hybridity and alternative discourses is not so much the intentional, stylistic experiments students use to analyze dominant forms. What matters here is
the “collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms.

[An] intentional artistic hybrid is a semantic hybrid, not semantic and logical in the abstract (as in rhetoric) but rather a semantics that is *concrete and social*” (Bakhtin 360). It is in the clash between two opposing forces—in this case, SAW and AAVE—that real learning happens. If students are told simply that their work is non-standard and cannot be used for academic purposes, learning is diminished. What students learn in this scenario is to mimic a discourse for which they have no prior history or background. But this mimicry is not a ventriloquation; it is not a dialogic engagement with academic discourse in which the two discourses talk with one another. As Gualalupe Valdes argues in “The Teaching of Academic Language to Minority Second Language Learners”:

[Classrooms] must be opened up to multiple texts and multiple voices. Students must be encouraged to see themselves as having something to say, as taking part in a dialogue with teachers, with students in their classrooms, with students in their schools, with members of their communities, and with other writers who have written about issues and questions that intrigue them. I maintain that students should not be encouraged to merely pretend to talk to distant audiences so that their teacher can correct their vocabulary and syntax. They should be made aware of other voices, of how they speak, how they write, of the ways they say and do not say what they mean, of the resources they use to gain attention, to persuade, and to explain, and then they should be encouraged to respond (88).

Valdes acknowledges that it is not enough to claim we are creating a community of writers. In order to maintain powerful sites of learning in the composition class, it is necessary for students
to understand the validity of their own discourses, and to engage with each other in analyzing and contrasting academic discourse with their own home language.
Conclusion

This semester, one of my students wrote me a short note on one of his homework assignments: “The book says that people in different countries argue differently than we do. What does that mean? Could use more explaining.” Unknowingly, this student arrived at a key insight of this project, and one that I firmly believe in. The English composition classroom should be a site of language study, and this means not only teaching students writing process techniques, but also linguistic elements such as grammar, different rhetorical forms, and awareness of other English discourses and dialects. In this way, we could better introduce students to the different writing demands they will face throughout their education. If educators envision the writing classroom as a language class, the rhetorical and expressive elements of different students’ home dialects become a key part of writing instruction. This argument is very much in line with process theories of writing instruction that view all composition as a social activity in which peer reviews, drafting, and revision are essential to the writing process. Encouraging hybrid discourse work in class—parodies of academic texts, mixtures of home
languages and SAE/SAW—creates a space in which students can learn from the collision between languages, between official and unofficial scripts.

There is a potential here for students to do much more than assimilate the dominant discourse: when educators explore linguistic elements of SAE, SAW and other languages, they extend an invitation to study the social aspects of language, thereby creating opportunities for “new world views, with new ‘internal forms’ for perceiving the world in words” (Bakhtin 360). Bakhtin’s argument is that usage of hybrid forms requires critical thinking; it encourages a deeper level of analysis than when only one language is used. It is the contrast between discourses, therefore, that opens up opportunities for students to understand the elements of SAW: What makes this language (SAW) different than their own? What kinds of ideas are privileged in this discourse?

Teachers who employ genre analysis assignments in their classes already address some of these issues, but a logical next step is to combine genre analysis with alternative discourse assignments, thus allowing students to analyze two different forms of writing and expression. Following this argument, other possibilities for exploring alternative discourses can be considered. Students can experiment with mixing creative writing with narrative scholarship; they can study creative writing texts and use them as a springboard for analyzing standard academic articles, or they can fuse rhetorical elements of journalism with personal narratives.

Beyond analysis, hybrid discourse also invites students to explore their own cultures and social spheres. This is because language is not an abstract theory; it is a living and ever-changing social entity that holds in its words the traditions and ideologies of its speakers and writers. We only need to read how several different newspaper accounts of the murder of Malcolm X depict two completely different ideas of reality—of what happened the day he was
killed—to understand the power of words to change our perspectives of an event or person
(Chafee 1). But just as words have the capacity to do harm, or manipulate, or obfuscate, they
also allow us to express our innermost thoughts. There are events, ideas, and beliefs that we
cannot express in a foreign discourse—in a language not our own. It is then that we reach for the
discourse we know by heart, the words of our childhood, of our home, of our family and friends.

When educators invite students to write in hybrid discourses, they open up a conversation
on the power of language; they recognize the differences and similarities between academic
discourse and other languages, and they allow students the opportunity to use words that really
matter to them rather than exclusively discussing the dominant, and often alien, discourse of the
academy. This is an invitation for our students to enter into the academic conversation by
exploring language within the context of the writing class. For writing teachers in today’s
dynamic, multi-cultural classrooms, this invitation needs to be extended honestly, in the spirit of
democracy and solidarity that guides the process-oriented composition class.
Appendix: Literature Review

Process writing pedagogy stresses the importance of a writer’s relation to her audience. Students in process-oriented composition classes are taught that they should write not only for themselves, but also for their readers. Instructors also stress the importance of intertextuality—understanding how other texts affect students’ work—presenting both sides of an argument, and viewing writing as a process that involves drafting and revision. Students are encouraged to share their work in a communal setting where other writers can offer suggestions and opinions of their work. Humboldt State University’s English 100 and 100A classes are based on this process pedagogy; they follow a trend in the field of English composition to move toward a more inclusive curriculum. While in the past English composition courses stressed sentence-level correctness as vital to successful composition, instructors now recognize that grammatical correctness does not necessarily equal good writing. Thus, process writing pedagogy views all writing as a work in progress; writing is considered a fluid, not a static activity. The scholars discussed in this literature review suggest that in order to help students achieve a level of
introspection and analysis that will help them write in a wide variety of styles, instructors must
explore new, alternative ways of teaching English composition.

In “The Intellectual Work of ‘Mixed’ Forms of Academic Discourses,” Patricia Bizzell recognizes academic language as a discourse of mutual interaction within the community of
scholars and students. Because it is an interactive language—scholars challenge, argue and
support specific issues, as do students—this form of discourse cannot be static. Instead,
academic discourse changes through the course of time, as do other languages. As suggested by
Bizzell, however, because standard languages generally represent the views of the most
influential or powerful members of a community academic discourse usually reflects the cultural
values and rhetorical strategies of the “male, European American, and middle or upper class”
(Bizzell 1). Traditional academic discourse is essentially a grapholect that represents an
objective, skeptical, argumentative and precise ideology, and in order to be accepted within the
community of academic scholars students must work within the rigid structures of academic
language.

However, as Bizzell correctly suggests, academic language is not fixed in place, and “at
any given time, multiple versions of it are in use” (1). Academic language is diverse, just like its
community of speakers and writers. The schools and colleges of today are not the same
educational institutions of the past: today’s college students are a diverse group of learners who
come from many different social and cultural backgrounds. As the student body changes,
composition pedagogy also changes, and more and more scholars and students are writing in
hybrid forms that merge traditional academic writing with a more personal, subjective style.
These hybrid forms of writing are gaining in popularity because they allow beginning writers to
express themselves in ways that are more accessible than those available to them in the
traditional academic discourse. Hybrid discourse also allows for a wider variety of scholarly exploration and a “broader reading public” (Bizzell 3). Instead of writing for a small number of academics able to decipher the code of traditional academic prose, writers of hybrid discourse can make their knowledge available to a greater number of readers.

Even though hybrid or alternative discourse can be an asset in the writing class, Bizzell warns that teaching this new form comes with its own set of problems. Originally, Bizzell borrowed the term *hybrid* from postcolonial theory because she recognized the potential of this word as an example of crossing boundaries: “[this] implies that discursive and cultural boundaries are more blurred and, perhaps because of that blurring, more easily crossed than had been thought in so-called current-traditional, error-hunting writing instruction” (3). But Bizzell recognizes that to think of hybrid discourse in this manner is to oversimplify the difficult obstacles beginning writers must overcome in the academy. Bizzell points to Deepika Bahri’s work on postcolonial theory as an example of the problems inherent with the use of the word hybrid to describe this alternative writing style: hybrid discourse “tends to avoid the question of location because it suggest a zone of nowhere-ness, and a people afloat in a weightless ether of ahistoricity” (Bahri 3). No one understands the difficulties involved in crossing borders better than immigrant students, ESL writers, and first-year college students from disadvantaged socio-economic cultures, and to suggest that crossing the border into academic writing is easy is to forget the difficulties involved in learning a new and, for many writers, highly unfamiliar skill.

The idea of students crossing borders—of academic discourse as a different ideological space—is echoed by Mike Rose, who describes his own experiences trying to fit in as an academic writer. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose suggests that the English composition community has, for many years, looked at sentence-level correctness as an indication of the
effectiveness of student writing. Even though process theory de-emphasizes grammar instruction and sentence-level correction, students who commit many sentence level errors are usually placed in remedial or developmental writing classes. An extremely negative effect of this view of student writing is the tendency to view students’ texts as somehow diseased, as if an illness exists that the academy must cure before students are able to fully participate in the healthy society of normal scholars.

Rose suggests that the designation “remedial” has powerful implications in education—to be remedial [or developmental] is to be substandard, inadequate, and because of the origins of the term, the inadequacy is metaphorically connected to disease and mental defectiveness” (209). Rose further explains that the word “remedial” has its origins in law and medicine, and that this medical vocabulary pervades education today, to the extent that students who do not perform well in standardized tests are considered deficient in academic skills. This kind of discourse does not allow students to become critical readers and thinkers; instead, Rose argues that many students consider writing a bore, or something they would rather not do, since school curricula have already placed them in a very specific position as deficient and lacking in skills.

However, Rose argues that remedial students and basic writers are not any less rhetorically or stylistically capable than students in more advanced writing classes. The teaching of writing involves more than just an ability to teach students grammar and punctuation; teaching students to write academic prose also necessitates an understanding of the many social factors students struggle with in the academy. This is why Rose views “a failed education as social [rather] than intellectual in origin” (225). Developmental or remedial writers may not have a complete grasp of SAE stylistic forms—they are in the process of understanding and assimilating the grapholect of academic writing—but they are capable of arguing and defending their points.
of view, and they are capable of performing college-level analysis. However, many
developmental writing curriculums teach students to perform [very] constrained and ordered
tasks [under] the regimented guidance of a teacher, teaching them that the most important thing
about writing—the very essence of writing—is grammatical correctness” (211). Rose further
suggests that these methods of teaching writing do not help students, but instead enforce the
belief that writing is a tedious chore (211).

Academic writing, like any specialized discourse, has specific elements that make it
unique: objective analysis, a systematic analytical form, a rigorous and empirical argumentative
and rhetorical style. But like any discourse, academic writing does not form a closed linguistic
system. Instead, this specialized discourse lives within other discourses and languages: those of
undergraduate students, graduate students, and professors with varying degrees of experience.
As such, academic prose is a heteroglossic discourse, and is imbued with all the social, political,
and historical perspectives of its writers. And yet, because of the manner in which traditional
writing courses work with this specialized discourse, academic writing is still generally viewed
as a closed system of linguistic norms, as a unitary language. Mikhail Bakhtin, in “Discourse in
the Novel,” describes a unitary language as a discourse that is “opposed to heteroglossia” (270).
That is, a unitary language is a grapholect that lives within the heteroglossia of academic writing.
This unitary language attempts to “[defend] an already formed language [that of academia, in
this case] from the pressure of growing heteroglossia” (271).

Bakhtin argues that it is impossible to identify one unique language because human
language is inseparable from the culture and society that maintains it. In this sense, academic
language is only one of a multitude of dialects and forms of expression. Although academic
writing is presented as a dominant form of communication separate from other, lesser discourses,
the fact that this specialized language lives within a heteroglot world makes it possible for educators and students to challenge its centralizing, unitary forms. Bakhtin describes heteroglossia as “organized in [the] low genres” (273). That is, a heteroglot language is the discourse of the “clown, [ridiculing] all languages and dialects; [it is in] the literature of the fabliaux and the Schwanke of street songs, folk sayings, [and] anecdotes, where there was no language center at all [and] no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face” (273). Bakhtin recognizes that as a unitary language attempts to centralize discourse—to encapsulate in one form a multitude of societal influences—heteroglossia works to decentralize this same, dominant, unitary language. Heteroglossia is thus “parodic and aimed sharply and polemically against the official [language]. [It is a discourse that has] been dialogized” (273). Heteroglossia, therefore, critiques the notion of a single valid discourse.

The value of heteroglossic language in the writing class is demonstrated by Jeffrey Maxson’s work with alternative writing assignments in “Government of da Peeps, for da Peeps and by da Peeps: Revisiting the Contact Zone.” Maxson asks his students to study the elements of academic writing in order to determine its unique features. After his students have analyzed an academic discourse text, Maxson assigns parodies and translations of academic writing (from academic writing to students’ own vernaculars)—he places student writing within the heteroglot world of the carnival. The form of writing students produce is sometimes very different from what most academic scholars are used to, but the level of analysis and critical thinking required in producing these parodies of scholarly prose is no less than what is needed to produce a standard, objective, and empirical academic paper. These assignments are valuable because they allow students to see the differences and similarities between “informal vernaculars and the formal languages of the academy” (Maxson 25). But Maxson also suggests that in a college
composition class students “work themselves into and through unfriendly language [by]
combinations of assimilation and resistance,” (25) an insight inspired by Mary Louise Pratt’s
“Arts of the Contact Zone.” Students thus assimilate themselves into the language of the
academy by using its tools, but alternative discourse exercises can help them identify those tools
and compare them to their own rhetorical styles. In this way, students gain a deeper
understanding of the writing process; they learn how this “creative misuse foregrounds the
material and discursive regimes that both constrain and enable people’s speech and writing”
(Maxson 25).

Maxson also argues that when writing teachers encourage students to write only in the
common and accepted form of the dominant discourse they do not serve themselves or their
students well. In fact, by maintaining the status of academic writing as the only valid form of
language many writing instructors fail to challenge themselves and their students, because they
do not create any space in their curriculum in which students can challenge positions of power
and authority. Alternative discourse, on the other hand, creates and maintains spaces where
“students can be written into new configurations of power and authority that can benefit both
sides” (Maxson 26). For students coming from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic
backgrounds, producing standard college essays may be a survival strategy, but Maxson
questions whether this way of teaching writing as a sink or swim skill is a sound pedagogical
strategy.

Instead of teaching academic writing as a survival tool, alternative composition
pedagogies challenge students to critique the authority of the dominant discourse. When
students compose parodies of academic writing they are not merely poking fun at an elevated,
sometimes obfuscatory rhetoric. Instead, they situate themselves in a critical position from
which they can analyze this new language. It is necessary that students question the authority of academic discourse, so that their writing can become a unique form of expression rather than a forced mimicry. This is David Bartholomae’s argument in “Inventing the University”: students begin their first year of college without the authority and skills to fully participate in academic discourse. Composition teachers, however, must prepare students to engage in the academic conversation; their goal is to bring students up to the level of the acceptable dominant discourse as quickly as possible (Bartholomae 61).

Thus, students must “invent the university” (Bartholomae 61) every time they prepare to write an essay. That is, they must “speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us [in power,] and they [must do this] before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in, and before, at least in terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say” (Bartholomae 78). Rather than make students merely passive participants in a language that is not their own, Bartholomae argues for an alternative writing pedagogy in which students move beyond mimicry to “get inside [the] discourse” (81) of the academy. For example, when faced with an academic writing prompt, most students will try on the language of the academy the way one tries on a new article of clothing (Bartholomae 61). But we can put clothing back on the rack when it does not fit; we can pick and choose from different styles depending on what kind of an image we wish to project. The writing student, however, cannot do this. She must try on a completely new rhetorical style before she is prepared to wear it. Unlike a shirt or a pair of blue jeans, this is one cultural article that she cannot put back on the rack. Both Bartholomae and Maxson agree that alternative writing pedagogies can provide a means for students to move beyond mere transcription of a foreign discourse.
It is not surprising that composition instructors teach writing as an academic survival tool. After all, academic work is based largely on competition: the struggle to publish, to argue against others so as to make one’s current argument valid. From a feminist perspective, this struggle to survive is wholly patriarchal: argument is an agonistic, male-centered rhetorical strategy because it values logical, linear, and objective reasoning while it devalues expressiveness and emotion. In “Feminist Pedagogy,” Susan Jarratt argues that a writing instruction based on patriarchal rhetorical forms “does not allow for the expression of women’s experiences and ways of making sense of the world” (122).

In writing courses, students are generally taught to write primarily in an objective third person voice; they are told to avoid asking questions on essays, since what is important in academic work is to provide answers and arrive at a conclusion. Posing questions that cannot be immediately answered is discouraged. Although it would be incorrect and even destructive for an inclusive writing pedagogy to suggest that one definite pattern of male and female writing exists, (for example, to argue that all feminine writing is emotional and all male writing is objective and logical), teaching only the dominant, male-dominated discourse of academic writing enforces the idea that only this discourse matters. Jarratt argues that language—in this case, academic discourse—is “a symbolic system associated deeply with masculinity” (122). Just like the symbolic system inherent in any language, the “borders defining academic discourse are similar to the boundaries dividing genders, [ethnicities], classes and sexualities: limits that have more than symbolic significance” (Jarratt 122). Thus, when instructors teach standard academic discourse without allowing students a chance to examine and critique it, they are teaching more than just a set of forms. The male-centered ideologies of this dominant discourse affect students’ identities as they attempt to understand and enter the academic conversation.
Jarratt suggests a writing pedagogy that teaches a variety of argumentative styles: subjective, narrative, “mixed genre and mixed language essays” (122) and other non-standard forms as a means of promoting empowerment and inclusiveness in the writing class.

The disconnect between the work student writers should be able to accomplish and the texts they actually produce is investigated by Dwight Atkinson and Vai Ramanathan in “Cultures of Writing: An Ethnographic Comparison of L1 and L2 University Writing/Language Programs.” Investigating their institution’s second-language and basic college composition courses, Atkinson and Ramanathan found that writing instructors discourage a formulaic approach to writing. For these rhetoric and composition instructors, the traditional five-paragraph essay is considered detrimental to the analytical and introspective work taught in their classes. In fact, student essays that appear to follow a formulaic approach are graded lower than texts that investigate issues on a deeper level (Atkinson and Ramanathan 547). Critical thinking, one of the hallmarks of the college composition course, is viewed as nearly impossible when students follow a simplistic essay format modeled on the five-paragraph essay. Ideally, writing instructors want their students to construct essays that support a thesis while demonstrating originality, awareness of counter-arguments, and use of synthesis to add support to the original position.

One problem with this approach, as argued by Atkinson and Ramanathan, is that, in attempting to teach their students creative, critical thinking, what composition teachers are actually doing is re-inventing the five-paragraph essay. When students are told to logically support a thesis throughout an essay, writing teachers are, in fact, presenting yet another pre-packaged essay format. In this case, this form is the analytical, thesis-driven essay. Rather than
encouraging students to present original work, what this pedagogical method enforces is a colonizing of students' minds by the ideological processes of the academy.

Because writing teachers need to provide a model essay—a form—for their students to work with, the thesis-driven, analytical essay is seen as a way of insuring at least a modicum of understanding of what academic writing entails. In other words, students who come into the basic writing class with little or no preparation in academic writing need models for their writing. The thesis-driven essay fits this purpose admirably. However, as noted by Atkinson and Ramanathan, this form does not solve the problems faced by marginal students, ESL writers, and others not familiar with academic discourse. While rhetoric and composition teachers value rationality and objectivity as the qualities of an excellent essay, these same cultural values—and they are cultural values because they carry within them the ideology of the Western, patriarchal, academic community—are not the cultural values of all students in a writing course. Thus, the idea that college composition classes foster individuality and introspection in student writing is a contradiction: individuality is nearly impossible to achieve in a text if the writer must write within a prescribed mold (Atkinson and Ramanathan 557,558).

The idea of composition pedagogy as a means of forcing students into a prescribed mold is supported by Keith Fort's "Form, Authority and the Critical Essay." Fort argues that "available forms determine attitudes" (171). Thus, if only one form is taught as correct and normal, students cannot be expected to have a variety of opinions, nor can they be expected to express themselves in a variety of ways. This, of course, is contrary to the work they are actually supposed to do in a university. Fort here agrees with Atkinson and Ramanathan: academic writing is not just something done by English students; it is performed by students in a variety of contexts and genres. Thus, to teach only one form is to teach only one aspect of critical thinking.
Fort’s argument also coincides with Susan Jarratt’s description of academic writing as male-centered and agonistic: “The composition class [is frequently] ruled by a formal tyranny. [When] students write [academic] essays they are forced to respond to experience in given ways, the ways of cool rationality, objectivity and clarity” (Fort 172). Of course, as Fort explains, these are important objectives for academic work, but they should not be taught as the only correct form of expression in a university.

Since most composition classes approach student writing assignments in this fashion, however, objectivity is stifled, because the “form of the essay conditions thought patterns and, particularly, attitude towards authority” (Fort 173). Far from innocent, what this type of pedagogy sustains is a cultural ideology that is not the student’s; it prescribes and maintains the ideas of the dominant, patriarchal culture. Fort argues that, although the typical writing prompt may appear to lead to an infinite number of possible responses, this multitude of expressions and ideas is only possible within one very specific form: that of the standard thesis-driven essay. This kind of writing instruction is paradoxical in that the humanities strive to teach students cultural awareness and respect for others’ opinions. And yet, the typical writing assignment in a college composition class actually teaches students that their own rhetorical styles and forms of expression are not relevant to the culture of academia. Students are thus forced to accept the dominant discourse before they have a chance to analyze it or question its validity.

As the many voices in this literature review indicate, English composition is currently undergoing a transformation: it is clear that traditional approaches to the teaching of writing are not adequate in the multicultural, many-faceted classrooms of today’s colleges and universities. In addition, teaching students to write in a very specific form—a form that merely replicates the five paragraph essay—cannot prepare writers for the multitude of texts they will have to write
during their college careers, such as in-class essays, lab reports, articles, summaries, etc. These scholars differentiate between traditional academic writing and alternative writing—a style that more closely follows the democratic ideals of process writing pedagogy. In order for process theory to fulfill its goal in the writing class, educators must be prepared to offer their students a variety of assignments encompassing different subject positions and allowing for different rhetorical styles, and they must view traditional academic writing as one language among many, rather than the only, or most valuable means of expression.
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