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11-17-2003

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Rolison, Garry and Rolison, Kathrine, "Writing Assessment as Gate-Keeping: Preventing Undergraduate and Graduate Academic Achievement and Degree Attainment Among Poor Students of Color " (2003). *Eighth Annual National Conference, POCPWI (2003).* Paper 21.
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Writing Assessment as Gate-Keeping: Preventing Undergraduate and Graduate Academic Achievement and Degree Attainment Among Poor Students of Color

Abstract
This essay discusses how writing serves to prevent academic progress among students of color on predominantly white campuses. In particular, the work identifies writing as a strategy to maintain as hegemonic Eurocentric truth and knowledge against knowledge and truth challenges as they come from communities of color.

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This essay questions the common perception among many on predominantly white campuses that students of color reduce the quality of education that can be provided on the campus because of their limitations in writing. Instead, the essay argues that there is no such animal as "good writing" except as a construction often at the caprice of those in power across academe. The political challenge that students of color bring to this conception is one that threatens to deconstruct it. In short, awareness that communication may be best expressed through the spoken word and performance as opposed to the written word and precise lecture. Most importantly, however, as recipients of writing advice that differs from one expert to another. It is through this process that the student becomes aware that the act of correcting writing is a political one and represents one's familiarity with Anglo-Saxon culture as much as it does any rules of good writing.

Which sentence do we consider correct here? The cat chased the ball. The ball was chased by the cat. It is the first sentence. Why, because the cat is the subject, the ball is the object, and it is the subject that acts and the object is acted upon or on. Oh wait, my grammar program tells me that I am being wordy here. Let's (Let us) try, because the cat is the subject, the ball is the object, and the subject acts and the object is acted upon or on. I am at a lost to tell you why the two sentences differ with respect to meaning. By the way, is it on or upon?

I went to a ghetto school and I never heard of the rules that I invoked above to make my writing better. I do not think that I communicated better, but I do know that I used the rules of writing English that are appropriate. Oops, there we go being too wordy again. I do know that I used the appropriate rules of writing. Therefore, undergraduate school was catch-up in writing all the time.

Therefore (consequently-same word twice), I bought a writing book for those for whom English is their second language. I learned the rules and went on. I do not know if I can end with that preposition at the end of a sentence like that. My grammar program did not pick it up, so maybe I can.

The purpose is to show that writing is an arbitrary process that hides itself under putatively universal rules for English speakers. In other words, to show that writing exists through convention established by power. One who can employ these rules successfully is one who has been educated. Not one who has simply acquired the writing patterns of dominant class. It appears to us as universal because we have all given consent to it. After all, does not good writing mean effectively getting your ideas across to others? We argue only if the ones receiving your ideas understand good writing. In other words, are similarly educated otherwise it may inhibit communication among those for whom these rules are not common sense but exist in a sea of other common sense rules for writing. Say, a newspaper headline, an advertising slogan, labels and so on. What some may label as practical English.

Why this discussion of practical and educated English matters and its connection to college students of color is direct? Those who determine the grades of domestic students of color apply the hegemonic rules of writing which asserts Anglo-Saxon superiority and the suppression of their respective culture. If this persists, they become disadvantaged students and do not graduate or graduate with a grade point average to low to allow them to attend graduate or professional school. The power to name a good or a bad writer is simultaneously the power to graduate or not graduate a student. In short, it helps maintain the inequalities in our educational system where students from good schools, often private, continue to attain academically while those from poor segregated schools fail to thrive academically. In the end, this prevents a professional and intellectual class to serve communities of color in a voice understood by that community.

Presenters

Garry Rolison is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the California State University, San Marcos. He has published on women and crime, race and ethnicity, Black student alienation and class structure. He is presently researching the nexus of race and sexuality in the United States.

Kathrine Rolison is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of History at the Arizona State University. She is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and is completing her dissertation on the impact that Federal Allotment Policy had on Cherokee people in the 20th Century. She has also presented on various issues affecting Cherokee people. During her graduate studies, she also has served as a graduate academic advisor.