
Embracing My Culturally Diverse Literacy

SARAH ROYER

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My communities have taught me how to have conversations. This might be apparent in my conversational style writing. My grammar might not be perfect, but my writing flows naturally, like a conversation. Much like Amy Tan, the language spoken in my family has influenced the way I speak today. Tan believes this negatively impacted her results on standardized tests and I agree (2). Simply because I do not have a high SAT or other standardized test score, it does not necessarily make me less intelligent than my peers with higher scores. The difference may be that my communities are more casual, and my peers have been exposed to more academic language.

Sometimes, I blame my communities for not providing me more opportunities to develop my academic language. On the other hand, I also appreciate them for teaching me how to have wonderful conversations. Kelsey Butler mentions that academic discourse in US schools and home discourses are two big literacy sponsors (69-70). I agree. However, I need to add my church family in the mix of sponsors. The communities conflict with one another; they all have different literacy practices. Sometimes, in certain situations, they can be similar. My home and church discourses are similar because they are all Jamaicans. They speak genuine Jamaican Patois. Butler also talks about mixing individual voice along with academic discourse (72). I have not experienced any difficulty doing so in high school or earlier. Now with my UCF academic discourse, sometimes it feels like I have to abandon my personal experiences and voice. Fortunately, that does not happen in ENC 1101. However, it does happen in history class where I must write based on facts and evidence—no use of personal experiences or opinions—and ignore temptations to include preconceived notions. Therefore, I will protect my memories of home and not allow them to be stripped from me, like they were for Butler sometimes (68).

My academic experiences have not taken away from my personal experiences. Until now, the two have always worked together. This may be true while I am a freshman. Perhaps this might change by my senior year when I will be writing many papers without first-person, not using life experiences, and not including opinions. I will keep in touch with my opinions and home and church discourse, which happen to be similar to one another. I will not allow academia to wipe away my memories and other linguistic and literacy practices from home.

However, in order to be successful in my tough academic discourse, I need to align my voice with it at times. Furthermore, I need to find a way to compromise successfully. I believe it is possible to balance academic language practices with those of family and church.

High School as a Sponsor

Conversations at school are the easiest of all. Ms. Thomas, Beverly Thomas, was the best 10th grade English teacher in my pre-college years. After the 10th grade, I found out that she was my 2nd cousin. She was brutally honest and pushed me to my full potential. Neither of us knew we were related, but somehow we grew close. Thinking back, it all made sense. Not many students

have their teachers' personal home phone number, but I had hers. Actually, I think most high school teachers do not even like their students. We were so close that I was able to discuss teenage school drama with her. I also got the inside scoop on teacher drama.

Ms. Thomas was born in Dominica (like my dad) and grew up in the British education system. Funny thing about her, she would always switch between the Dominica Patois and British English. Every time I would say "mines" instead of "mine," she would give me a crazy look and burst out with Dominica Patois, "Girl wah wrong wid yuh nuh?" She'd then switch back to her British English, saying, "There is no such thing as mines, it is mine!" Early in the year, I was getting C's on essays in her class. By mid-year, I had worked up to earning many A's. This happened because she pushed the class, not just me. She made us read a variety of texts to improve our writing. She also taught us the process of comprehending difficult texts by answering certain questions about them.

Students and faculty at McArthur High School influenced my use of abbreviations. I use them very often. I think it's okay to do so, but there is a limit. For example, instead of saying "McArthur," we say "Mac" or "McA." Some would even say "the mac and cheese." My high school's principal once wrote,

Our mission is to integrate rigorous and relevant academic standards to increase student achievement so as to prepare students for life after McArthur HS. Furthermore, as you know, McArthur HS will continue to afford students a number of different opportunities to be successful in their pursuit of a post-secondary education. . . . Also, we will continue to encourage you to get involved in the many clubs, sports, and activities we have to offer here at McArthur HS. At McArthur HS our motto will continue to be: It's Because We Are and I Am:

...Going To Improve Everyday
...Not Going To Settle For Mediocrity
...Going to Strive To Be A Leader

Yes...We Are Going To Succeed... Because I Am McArthur! (LaPace)

This is the principal's message and he used "HS" multiple times instead of saying "high school" (what an example of excessive abbreviation use). As much as it annoyed me to hear this every morning or afternoon, it actually played a huge role in how I am today. Especially the part stating we're "not going to settle for mediocrity."

McArthur is located in an urban neighborhood and is culturally diverse with Hispanic, Caribbean, White, Black American, and Asian students. I learned some Spanish, Haitian Creole, and even more patois from speaking with many students. From being involved in several clubs and going to many events, I encountered all of those students from different backgrounds.

School conversations are relaxed and casual. I could have conversations with my teachers and other faculty about anything. When I talked about boyfriend problems, some teachers would give advice. As a member of student government, I had many casual conversations with Principal LaPace. Conversations with my dance coach/math teacher were also casual. We communicated by text message quite often and she taught us how to be team players during practice by allowing us to run the practice sessions. This helped me to approach people and have conversations. This environment is not strict. It is friendly and relaxed.

While in high school, we had to read *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (one of my favorites), *The Crucible*, *The Odyssey*, other Greek literature, and many other stories I cannot even remember. I had to rely on SparkNotes and other classmates, just like Alex Koenig (24). I laughed when he mentioned SparkNotes because I can totally relate. I could not stand those boring and complicated

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stories I was required to read. Also, while in high school, I had a major case of writer's block, similar to Alcir Santos Neto (10). I think I expected to be perfect. I did not experience this in middle school or elementary. I am not sure what happened in high school. I spent a lot of time reading and re-reading. It would take me forever to get my work done. I was not accustomed to writing five-page essays or research papers until now. UCF writing standards of scholarly English are new to me. In the first week of school, I felt as if I was smacked in the face when I realized I had to do all of this work. It was stressful.

My thinking process for my school community is simple: I think about how I can get my peers and/or faculty to agree with what I'm saying. I think carefully before I speak so I don't say something stupid. I have blurted out a few stupid ideas or comments during club meetings where we had to give suggestions and/or ideas about fundraisers or other activities. Looking back, high school was really fun, and I had a great time. Unfortunately, high school did not require much reading of scholarly journals. Therefore, I struggle with reading them now. With my new UCF academic community, I am now being exposed to this kind of writing.

Family as a Sponsor

There is never a dull moment when communicating in my family. I enjoy the many varieties of conversation styles. At the same family event, I can have baby small talk with my three-year-old cousin as well as a deep conversation with my big brother about teenage boys. Conversations with the older folks are a little tricky. Sometimes, I have to think before I speak because, in my family, I am reminded to stay in a child's place.

Last summer, I went on a family trip to Canada. It was like a mini family reunion, on my mom's side. (My dad's side of the family is much smaller, and I don't communicate with them too often, except for Ms. Thomas and a few others.) I have many relatives living in Toronto and we all gathered to celebrate Caribana, a huge Caribbean festival. There were cousins, aunts, and uncles from all over the world, from Miami to New Jersey to England and Germany. My Aunt Millie who lives in Toronto was schooled in the original British system. She is very similar to Ms. Thomas, my favorite English teacher. She speaks properly all the time, even at breakfast.

One morning I sat to eat breakfast and began surfing through my social media pages. Before I could like a post, I heard, "NO WAY, not at this table." Aunt Millie would not allow anyone to have phones at her table. She says, "This is family time and phones will be there when we are finished." Every time I sit down at the table, I can hear her voice in my head, reminding me of proper table etiquette.

Toward the end of our reunion, we had a big family barbeque. This was much more relaxed than breakfast with my dear Aunt Millie. It was a time for us to eat, drink, be merry, and dance to some relaxing reggae music. We used our cellphones to record on Snapchat and Instagram. We had a great time and did not want it to end. We all agreed on the importance of communicating on a regular basis. As a result, we created a family group chat called "FamJam." On FamJam, we share just about everything, from what's on our mind to graduation and wedding pictures. We talk about global issues and things going on in Jamaica. The motivational videos and funny memes are my favorite things on FamJam. Therefore, texting is not killing my language practices (McWhorter). Texting is used in all my communities. It actually helps my language practice. I can use it to communicate with classmates, talk to my family on our group chat or text my church about upcoming events. I enjoy connecting with my young and not-so-young family members on FamJam.

My favorite group chat is called "Baddies." This group (girls only) consist of my half-sister Faith and my cousins Erica and Tanoo. We are all around the same age and we go everywhere together. We have casual girl talk, which includes boy drama, parties, and popular posts on social media. It's funny, sometimes when we are together, we still text one another because we don't want others to hear our conversations. We spent a lot of time together and learned from each other. Erica always says "woii." It is a Dominican expression that is used as a reaction and could be translated as

“oh my gosh.” I find myself using this expression as well. Erica and Tanoo always speak with a Dominican accent. Faith is simply American with no Caribbean traits. I love having conversations in my favorite group chat.

Conversations in my family are not just fun, they are easy. Those conversations can be motivating when I am writing. My mom helps by telling me to read every day: “Read anything and everything and listen to audio books.” I listened, and my writing has improved. Mom said to “just spit it out” on the keyboard, and, once all my ideas are written, I can go back and revise. She taught me the technique of writing notes to myself. Sometimes I forget ideas so writing notes really help. This is a big part of my writing process. I take Mom’s advice because she has a master’s degree and when she speaks her words sound clear and precise. I’ve looked through her work and her writing skills are amazing. She inspires me to write well. Overall, my family has been very influential in my language and literacy practices.

Church as a Sponsor

My church is my second family. There are no formalities at Monument of Faith Church of God. We have casual conversations. No offense to Catholics, but my church is friendlier and more relaxed. They don’t judge if you’ve done something wrong. With close, personal relationships, we are free to talk about many topics in this church. The majority of the congregation is Jamaican and the remaining represents other Caribbean islands. My church family speaks Jamaican Patois. I learned some Patois from them. We even sing songs in Patois. For example, a song about how things are already better because the Lord is on your side goes like this: “Tings ahready betta, but the Lord is on my side, tings ahready betta, tings ahready betta, tings ahready bettaa.” Most of the songs have a Caribbean tempo.

The pastor and other leaders have taught me how to live according to the Bible. Reading the King James Version is difficult because it was translated into Early Modern English. However, Sunday school teachers explain it. In Sunday service, the preacher speaks, and we listen. In Sunday school, teachers break down the Bible, line by line, and explain the texts. In children’s church, we are taught to share with others. In Vacation Bible School, we have to write a prayer journal. For my age group, we sit in a circle and have real-life discussions related to Bible stories. My thinking

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process for church depends on the age and closeness of the people I am with. With the younger children, I speak according to their age. For the older children, it’s based on relationship. Adults don’t say much, but sometimes they can be very annoying, especially when talking about my perfectly normal green hair.

Outside of Sunday service, we have plenty to keep us connected. We send Bible verses in our group chat, talk about world issues and how we have to be strong in our faith. We have a chat for the youth choir and one for the praise team. Our texting language is

usually Patois or regular English. We also attend youth convention, where we interact with other youth and church leaders. Teen Talent is another great outside activity. We show off our talents in art, poetry, dance, and voice. Last year, we won first place at regional and state and were able to attend the international competition in Tennessee. It was great to interact with people from all over the globe. My church has influenced my morals and decision-making. The people at my church are partly responsible for my high self-esteem and self-respect. Growing up in the church has shaped me into the person I am today.

Conclusion

Something in my head tells me, “You are around these people, so talk this way.” It’s not something I think of intentionally; it’s just automatic. Saying the wrong things has taught me what not to say. Getting compliments on my topic and saying the right things have taught me what to say. I enjoy being a part of these communities and know how to adjust to each one. If I say something in a weird way or say something that’s for a different community, I may get a “Why are you talking like that” or “Why you sound like that?” Even in high school, I would always get the “Why you sound so proper?” However, at home I would get the “Why you so ghetto?” from my parents and older family members.

Brandt declares that sponsors are influential with literacy learning and in many other ways (183). Different sponsors have different jobs and serve different purposes. They affect text messages or formal papers. They affect almost everything around me, especially my thinking process and my behaviors. Without my sponsors, I wonder what my literacy and language practices would be like.

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Sarah Royer

Born in Miami, Florida, Sarah Royer is a freshman majoring in Environmental Studies and minoring in Political Science and Africana studies. Her passion for the environmental sciences and politics started in the second grade when she first learned about global warming, recycling, and other earth-related subjects. After graduating from UCF, she plans to go to law school in order to pursue her dream of being an environmental lawyer so she can tackle environmental issues from a policy standpoint. She is involved with the Caribbean Students Association, Jamaican Students Association, Club Kreyol, NAACP, National Black Law Student Association, Phi Delta Phi international legal honor society, Phi Alpha Delta law fraternity, and the LEAD Scholars academy.