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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author/educator recalls a 1972 article that reviewed 11 books about the English to minorities. Over the years, teaching issues have been debated--one commonly discussed topic of the '90s being Ebonics. The author asserts that the public at large pays no attention to most academic writing. Exploitation of graduate students as teaching assistants was also discussed in the 60s; the Wyoming Resolution appeared in 1986, and many professional groups have promulgated codes of ethics. However, good professionals such as writing instructors get in the way of significant change. Academics should realize that there will never be unity among academic labor as long as the institution of tenure exists. Tenure supposedly protects academic freedom (for the tenured only), but the protection is not very effective. Administrators have lots of ways of controlling the tenured--denial of raises, punitive course assignments, etc. The real function of tenure now is to replicate the encompassing two-tiered society within the academy. So that an administrator might get a raise as big as the combined salaries of a married couple with long experience on staff. Academic workers should organize and battle for real change. The continued abuse of part-timers and TAs, and the unchanging insistence that "talking white" is talking right, should make it obvious to even the most submissive that tough action is necessary, not just good words. (NKA)

James Sledd
1998 4Cs, Chicago

Teaching English to the Disenfranchised: A Look Back

"You're an old crock, Grampa," my young grandson said. "You're an old crock." That was some fifteen years ago, and even then the boy was right. It was 'way back in the 40s that I first read a paper at a professional meeting. Much that I'm going to say in today's paper--my last--will be out of tune with the times, maybe quite mistaken. I know it will be called so.

My assigned subject is "Teaching English to the Disenfranchised: A Look Back." Limited personal experience makes me think of just two among the many groups that get dissed: first, students who didn't have the good sense to get born into prosperous Anglo families; and second, teaching assistants and part-timers, on whose systematic exploitation departments of English are built.

The first group became a problem when they insisted that separate but equal schooling was indeed separate but notably unequal. In consequence, after Brown vs. Board of Education, white teachers in Northern schools suddenly discovered that lots of black kids didn't talk like white kids. The NCTE expressed its horror on learning (I shudder to say it) that even the sacred word mother could be used obscenely. Canny mothers among white linguists saw their opportunity. They constituted themselves as a society of gurus, and for maybe twenty years there was sustained discussion of the nature and origin of what came to be called BEV--the Black English Vernacular.

Much less was said about the English of other minorities, notably Hispanics. If aged memory serves me, In 1972 I reviewed some eleven books in a single article in College English. I can't recall that more than one of them dealt with minorities other than African Americans.

What happened to all this academic discussion? In the flap over Ebonics in the 90s, we've learned at least one thing: issues that were debated, perhaps even settled, in the 60s and 70s, have been revived to be debated all over again, as if they had never been heard of before. Notions about English Only didn't even have to be revived. They've been perennial. I conclude that the public at large pays no attention to most academic writing. We talk to ourselves, with little or no effect outside our own little world.

It was also in the 60s that I got involved in the argument about the exploitation of graduate students as teaching assistants. In the 80s, the exploitation of part-timers as well became too extreme to be ignored, and in 1986 I read the paper that prompted the Wyoming Resolution. Within a few years, I was moved to further unhelpful rhetoric (the adjective is Peter Elbow's), explaining why the Respectable had buried the Resolution with full academic honors. But no professional society now counts itself respectable unless it has harrumphed at length about "contingent labor," held summit meetings, promulgated codes of ethics, urged departmental self-studies--and done nothing effective to change the situation. I conclude again that talk alone (if I were younger I would say discourse)--talk alone just isn't going to change even our small bit of a world.

Having now dealt with Peter Elbow and my assigned subject, I proceed to ignore both and to say what I really came to say. Given our ineffectively talkative past, can we hope for a less distressful future? I doubt it; but we still should try.

The first thing we need to do is to recognize that we ourselves are part of the problem. Maybe ten years ago, I read a paper to the Writing Program Administrators. They set the question, Have we sold out? My answer was no, but we have bought in. We've tried to be good professionals, and good professionals get in the way of significant change. Bluntly,

the Profession serves the Profession, and the Profession is built on exploitation.

Look at the NCTE. For years, it's babbled about "upward mobility in the mainstream culture," the prize in the lottery that foolish people bet their lives on. Upward mobility in U. S. society means getting and wasting more and more of the world's irreplaceable resources in the hope of putting neighboring noses out of joint. To be upwardly mobile is to acquire the ability to look scornfully at more and more people. Upward mobility presupposes ugly class distinctions.

Instead of scratching and clawing for upward mobility, we should recognize that we are working folks. In our two-tiered society, we belong to the lower tier. Our right allies aren't deans and provosts and presidents and chancellors, but "contingent labor" and the folks that even contingent labor looks down on--the folks we call "staff," the janitors and furniture-movers and campus cops. They have their own opinion about us.

We'll never get unity among academic labor as long as we insist on the institution of tenure. Whether we like it or not, tenure is going to go, and we really should say good riddance to a special status in an era of layoffs and downsizing.

Supposedly, tenure protects academic freedom (for the tenured only), but the protection isn't very effective. Administrators have lots of ways of controlling the tenured--denial of raises, punitive course assignments, banishment from faculty councils and significant committees, post-tenure review (recently installed at the University of Texas), early retirement, covert censorship of the media.

The most effective of all the means of control is the long probationary period. Bucking for tenure in a cut-throat competition, the upwardly mobile learn timid prudence. Most tenured academics (not all) have studied to be mouselike. They've been so thoroughly brainwashed that they'd deny the charge indignantly.

The real function of tenure now is to replicate the encompassing two-tiered society within the academy. The tenured have

risen in the academic class structure, and the reward for their struggle is that they can despise the unrisen for not rising. If our transformative intellectuals, our liberators and empowerers, really meant what they say about the evils of frozen hierarchies, they would work to abolish both the tenure system and the related system of academic ranks. They would also work for a uniform pay scale, with automatic raises for seniority as long as performance remains satisfactory.

Such an egalitarian system isn't just the idle dream of a crazy old man with a flea up his posterior. Some community colleges have got along quite well without ranks. In many, the majority of the faculty aren't on the tenure track. Even august Berkeley, in the 50s, gave precisely the same salary to each newly anointed professor of English. It was less than ten thousand dollars.

With rank and tenure out of the way, faculty and staff could unite to battle the swollen regiments of corporatizing administrators for real academic freedom. Of course our bosses, as they wage class warfare against us underlings, try to make us think it's rude even to say the words class warfare. They've persuaded lots of the innocent to call obsequiousness civility.

I can't quite manage to be obsequious when the chancellor of the University of Texas system gets as big a raise in one year as the annual salary that I got after twenty years as a full professor. Today, that chancellor's raise is more than the combined salaries of a married couple with long experience on staff. Meanwhile, UT spends some ninety million dollars on "athletic facilities." For not much more than sixty thousand a season, a rich goat-roper can sit in his new luxury suite and watch a mediocre football team get flogged.

Back to my subject. Freed from the divisive hierarchies of rank and tenure, academic workers should organize and battle for real change. The continued abuse of part-timers and TAs, and the unchanging insistence that talking white is talking right, should make it obvious to even the most submissive

that tough action is necessary, not just good words, if we really believe what we say we believe about justice and freedom.

Just this month, Routledge is publishing a new book called African American English. Its editors, most of whom I know, are highly reputable--"leading experts in the field," the Routledge catalogue calls them. I'll happily buy their book: but it won't make a damn bit of difference on the streets of Oakland. In 1956, I tried to get out the vote for Adlai Stevenson in a waterfront precinct there. Halfway through the afternoon, a slick little man sidled up alongside me and said, "White boy, you be out o' here by five o'clock." Black kids on Oakland streets don't read books by professors at Stanford and the University of Chicago. Neither do their mamas. Neither do the mothers in board rooms and legislatures.

I can assure you, of course, that I took my consultant's advice and was out of Oakland and back in Berkeley before the sun went down: but the last of my quixotisms today will be the old, old plea that because we're all God's chillun [illegible] **(even chancellors and goat-ropers)**--because we're all God's chillun, we're all brothers and sisters. My father said that in 1902--and lost his job at Emory for saying it.

Yet the old truths are true still, even though today we can't talk without embarrassment about bomfog, the brotherhood of man and fatherhood of God. If we want our students to share a common language, we must want them to live together as equals. If we want to end the exploitation on which our profession is built, we should break the barriers that separate different groups of academic workers. And don't tell me such good things aren't possible. All four of my grandparents were born into slave-owning families. My grandchildren are happily multiethnic. Our damnation is that we don't make the possible real.

Do I think that what could happen will happen? Of course

not. The NCTE will still preach upward mobility; the MLA will still defend tenure; the risen compositionists, jargonizing in CCC, will still slip in coy phrases informing readers that they now teach graduate courses. We are part of a rotten social system. We can and should complain about it, loudly; but the system won't be changed until masses of people decide (if ever they do) that continued submission will be more painful than open rebellion. The truth remains that all of us have choices. Not all bad things just happen.

I will now go and sit on my flea.

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