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Answer This Simple Question

In the latter months of 2010, one of my colleagues from the long ago Rhetoric, Linguistics and Literature program at Southern Cal e-mailed to me the news that the county in which I live has the highest high school drop-out rate of black boys in the entire United States, news that my colleague, in fact, is responsible for corralling and analyzing.

About the same time that I received the e-mail, I returned from a visit to the province which has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, the northern most province of Afghanistan. I had just met a female paramedic and five or six pregnant women who had walked and/or ridden donkeys several days to a UNICEF clinic that tries to help the most at-risk (and mobile) women in the province save their lives and the lives of their unborn children.

What is this with me? I wondered. Do I have a special talent for failure? Or, as likely, do those who still keep up want to reassure me that nothing changes no matter how hard I work or wish it did?

The toggle switch kicked in: Why am I thinking about *me*?

The default—which is what a toggle is—as always made me feel worse: *who am I* if not the work that I do (or did) to which I have been committed for a lifetime and by which I define myself, not to mention for which I have collected salary checks over the course of an admittedly unplanned career. What should I do, give the money back?

And then I had another thought—memory also seems to be unplanned—of a conference that my graduate school TWI pals and I attended in the early 1980s, probably MLA, where I, a *basic writing* aficionado, listened from the back of an overflowing hall to a lecture by a brilliant, beautiful, *non-American* academic female who, by virtue of eloquence and equally exotic connections, had achieved something like rock star status in the field of rhetoric—or language or the politics of language, something like that.

Despite not being able to hear most of the lecture and not being able to follow the convolutions of the parts that I did hear, I said to myself as the applause cascaded, *Gee, I wish I could do that*. The context, if not each sentence, was clear to the gathered who, perhaps at the dying of a field in the outrage of a last red star, were making major investments in the claim that language is *par excellence* a tool of domination, not merely because it is wielded by dominators but because it is secretive. There is a club of secret sharers.

It was a great time to write a dissertation, one of those inimical documents where the conclusion really is about oneself if not one's own personal vendetta against the dominant world. (Indeed, in my case, I was almost done in by a favorite linguistics professor who announced at the beginning of the defense, 'I don't think I understand a word of this dissertation.')

I escaped.

Then, about eight or nine years ago, I was brought up short. I had just turned fifty . . . years old, and I was reading a newspaper.

There was an advertisement for a receptionist in the *Gulf News*:

> *To qualify for this job, answer this simple question.*
>
> *Are You Beautiful?*

You should look attractive, be below 30 years of age, fluent in English and possess exceptionally good telephone manners.

Mail your CV with a recent photograph to: AGA Advertising & Marketing, the region's fastest growing agency network.

Classified ads like this are probably not what my readers are used to seeing. Me either.

The gulf of the *Gulf News* was the Arabian Gulf, and the advertisement appeared in the early 2000s when I lived as an expatriate and taught in one of the small countries[1] that border the Arabian gulf. I was perplexed, too, though being perplexed is a sort of life condition with me.

The thing that bothered me about the particular ad was how the words managed to violate every possible applicant who might qualify—the young and beautiful—as well as those who might not qualify—everyone else on the planet and, of course, me.

So I began to write this essay about qualifications. But, as it turns out, the essay is also about language.

I was sure, of course, that I did not qualify. Age thirty was ancient history. I speak with a southern American twang, which makes other expatriates wince. As for attractive, when I was a very young waitress (actually, I was a pre-waitress, the one who shows up at the table with a pitcher of water prior to the appearance of the real waitress), a customer asked me, "Is that smile fake?"

I am unqualified for many jobs—actually, for most jobs—so it's not the fact of being unqualified that perplexed me. It was the palpable sense that the ad undermined the meaning of qualifications in ways reminiscent of the time when I *was* thirty. Indeed, what the ad said to me was that the chief thing to know about qualifications is their lineage.

In the Gulf country where I worked, the national women are covered from head to toe in black. Some women wear long black gloves, as well. Should a national woman apply for the job, the only photograph she might provide would have been taken when she was under ten years old. That, of course, would probably be before she could speak English. Thus, no competitors for this job would have been national women.

Of course, no national women would ever answer such an ad much less be a receptionist. The women to whom the ad is directed are *other* women, women from Europe, America, possibly Asia, or from more liberal yet substantially poorer Middle Eastern countries such as Syria or Lebanon where many women wear short skirts and mascara. These women live outside of their own countries in order to work. Every receptionist job, secretarial job, personal assistant job, executive personal secretary job is advertised for females, albeit not for covered females or old or ugly ones.

To be sure, not all other women are qualified, either. The job for which Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi women are solicited is maid. Sudanese women, though often Arab, are usually too dark skinned to sit in receptionist's offices. (Some national women also have dark skin but their darkness is not a factor in their not being receptionists.)

Of course, once non-national, under age thirty, potential receptionists clear the hurdles of beauty and the English language, they must enlist the services of an importer, which, of course, is a man. This ad does not say it, mostly because it is illegal in many cases, but the women that the marketing agency really hopes to hire are those who come into the country on husbands' or fathers' visas.

The successful female applicant for the marketing job can emerge only from among the expatriates who make up 90% of the country's population, and everyone in that 90% must have appropriate visas to maintain residence. Men can sponsor their wives and daughters (and sons until the age of 18) but the men, themselves, must be sponsored by the employer or company for whom they work. Such visas are expensive, and the men in the lowest paid jobs must purchase their own visas through paycheck deduction. However, a marketing company can hire a woman who is attached to a man's visa for free. The bonus is that the company can decline to offer benefits—like housing or health insurance—since it does not sponsor the visa holder.

These, then, are the paradoxes, or perplexities, if you will. Women who possess a certain, what —*fluency*?—of body parts and language are more employable than covered-up women whether or not fluent. Is it more sexist to qualify for a job because a 'pretty' woman can be seen or more sexist not to qualify because she can't be seen or because she isn't a pretty woman, open or shut? But no woman is employable absent permission of a father or, at least, a father figure, some of whom allow their daughters to take off more clothes than others, bringing to light dark skin color. Are some fathers more liberal or just poorer?

A caveat: This is not to be confused with the idea that clothes or lack of them makes the worker.

Indeed, almost nothing about national women's clothing itself is incompatible with working (which is not to advocate sexist jobs). Obviously, a lot of clothes are not inhibitors to job performance for Arab men—from the taxi drivers and Pakistani laborers who drive vehicles and backhoes in 120 degree sun to national ministers and stock brokers in Islamic banks. They all wear long flowing tunics over trousers with various headgear and face cloths. In fact, the only major difference between the tunics and head scarves of national men and other men is that nationals wear pure white, a distinction that links them to their ladies' slate black and divides them all.

As long as their ladies are fluent in English.

My distress is not, in my view, a simple case of my having misplaced my sympathy. I know who has it worse, and it's the Bangladeshi maid. The issue is that this country's mandate(oil, apparently, is not forever) to the universities that it so generously funds is to put its national women to work, and to do so the country has established elite women's universities to make it happen. The truth is that what has got me so exercised about this classified ad is less its offensiveness than a fear that once again I have found myself doing exactly the opposite of what I think I am doing.

So, exactly what is my part in this?

Let me put it this way: the chief qualification for the employment of the country's national women is their literacy. English literacy, not Arabic. And who am I? Their English teacher. And what are my qualifications?

This is the story.

A long time ago, I went to graduate school to get a degree in rhetoric, linguistics and literature (a degree that doesn't exist anymore) because I had a problem with Black English. It started during my tenure as a graduate assistant in the English department in the same small southern university where I had earned my BA. I instructed students barely younger than I in the intricacies and eloquence of freshman composition. My training consisted of passing freshman composition when I was an undergraduate freshman. When I expressed some trepidation to the philosophy professor who had been my main advisor and support before I switched to English to get the MA (because even I knew that an MA in philosophy was only slightly more worthless than a PhD in Philosophy) and for which I was awarded the composition teaching assistantship, he said, "The best teaching in your life will be the first year." I think he was probably right, with one exception.

I could not teach my black students the third person singular. I wracked my philosophical brain. I raided the composition text books of the day. I checked out the "writing center modules" on error, all based on the *Harbrace College Handbook* modules on error. I hauled into my office black student after black student and showed each one the simplicity of adding an "s" to "he run fast." Finally, I collected and examined the papers of my offending students, and *I* wrote writing center modules. Nothing really worked. My best recollection is that most of these students passed the composition courses because, aside from conjugation, they had no trouble mastering the other exquisite skills of freshman essays.

But I wasn't content. I grew up creek-side southern, and I could smell discrimination just as easily as the next female hick though, being a white female, my vantage was somewhat upwind. It was the 70's. I obtained the MA, taught a while longer, and sent in applications to PhD programs, attaching with nervous pride the Black English modules and the second professional paper I had ever delivered titled, "The Cows of the Third Person Singular." Surely what possessed me to compose this title became even more apparent when I stepped upon the Los Angeles university campus to start the degree program. Black or white, I was a hick from the fields whose rural English accent was at least as incomprehensible to my professors as the deletion of a single letter in a handful of verbs in all the language was to me. When the advisor kept looking over my outstretched, waving hand and asking, "Where's Miss Stuckey?" I suddenly realized that the only thing I could say consistent with the expectation was, "I be ' over here."

At graduate school, suffice it to say, I got what was coming to me. I learned everything I will ever need to know about studies in syntax, semantics, language acquisition, socio-linguistics, psycholinguistics, rhetorical theory, reading theory, literary theory, and pedagogies of communication and composition that, by the time they were finished with me, explained Black English to my satisfaction and caused my professors the untold misery that surely afflicts those who must deal on a regular basis with someone who discovers she has been wrong all along.

Not only had I come to believe that black English isn't really a matter of English—in the sense of whether it has or hasn't enough features to be a matter of any language—but that a *solution* to Black English in the classroom had little to do with language. I had hoped, I am sure I had hoped, that a few creative strategies, divined from the sorcery of enlightened and profound study in graduate school, would repair not only the incremental damage to freshman compositions of eighteen year old black students but would re-dress the vast insinuations implied by such damage. If

I could show s-deficit students a simple way to liberate what were otherwise *literate* essays, mixed with a scrum of thoughtfulness, the student could handle the rest. In a word, I thought that fixing composition could fix discrimination.

Okay, so maybe I was stupid. By the end of the time I'd finished that graduate program in the mid-1980s I had another idea. Not only would I stop believing that literacy made all the difference, I would take it upon myself to inform the rest of the world that it didn't. I would, as it ultimately turned out, work all of the angles, but I would not sell out the important issues implicated in literacy. This would be an honorable pursuit, probably interesting, and something for which, after five years in the theory pit, I was imminently qualified. Plus, by the time I reached this conclusion, I needed a job.

There are many barriers in Education, spelt with a big E. As a graduate student in a composition program located in an English department, I was aware of the split, and sometimes the nastiness, between the literary *literati* and us. I had no idea of the Wall of Shame (Blame?) that stood between departments of English and Schools of Education, spelt with two big Es. Not only was this barrier impregnable, apparently I was the only English department PhD in history to get through graduate school without knowing of it.

Naturally, the first position that I took was a researcher's job in a university's English department directing a literacy project in the public schools. From beginning to end, the chief reason anyone from either camp—English or Education- spoke nicely to me was the grant money; this is hyperbole but true. The project appealed to me because it claimed to improve literacy—it did—while it really tried to improve children's lives.

I worked in rural public schools that rationed toilet paper. While debates raged about students' poor performance on standardized tests, the project I directed involved platoons of students taking on the roles of tutors and mentors for regular periods of time during the school day to improve their literacy[2]. The drill was not complicated. Usually, older students read to younger students. The project did not offer recompense to the public school teachers aside from a few piddling stipends in the beginning. The pedagogy relied on materials at hand, usually library or donated story books[3].

The toilet-paper-rationing schools used scuffed and outdated library books, while the richer and whiter schools used newer and slicker library books, but the students all read books, pointed to pictures, and generally enjoyed each other's company. The most appealing part of the project—appealing because (a) it worked and (b) it fit my new subversive paradigm for literacy—was that the tutors came from the ranks of the reading-challenged, the specially educated, and the remedial. These students wrote regular letters and reports about their tasks, and by and large they did very good work, better work than they did on standard reading lessons and fill-in-the-blank worksheets.

As it happened, many teachers liked the activity so much that they let their ordinary and even gifted students become tutors so that part of the subversiveness got watered down. The not-very-good readers, of course, were often very good tutors, as were the good and great readers.

There was a second subversive layer to the project, however, that was so secret that no one dared articulate it—and I mean, seriously, that teachers *knew* that were doing something ran counter to the *state department*. This subversion involved the idea that students and teachers could more or less embrace the diversity of the communities that existed inside the stultifying environment of their schools, of their experience of every day education. To say it another way, cross age tutoring gave teachers a way to do what football games did, every Friday night in most rural towns in the south, which was not only to recognize but darn near demand diversity, cherishing chubby young black boys as much as blue eyed blondes struggling , all 410 SATS in English and math, in the common frenzy to tear down the goal posts at the end of the opponent's field. This was important, I thought, because so much of the rest of school was spent undermining most semblances of community which school was. For example, the reason readers already came pre-labeled was their test scores, not the students' actual qualifications for reading or writing, much less their qualifications for helping others learn literacy. It was interesting to watch a little third grade hellion, turn into a couch pillow when snuggled up against a repeat fifth grader whose disquisitions on Curious George navigated decades of children's literature.

I allude to secrecy only because I was convinced that teachers both understood and championed this aspect of community in distinct counter position to the idiotic things they were mandated to do in class, things that teachers knew didn't work but that were increasingly measured. Things which teachers cursed under their breath.

Most of the teachers, and, for that matter, most of the school administrators, knew that students could form educational communities beneficial to all the members. Even when teachers saw poor students improve as a result of the tutoring, the improvement elicited less surprise than confirmation of their best pedagogical instincts. Indeed, most teachers fully grasped the inutility of

chronic standardized testing, believed that massive assessment insulted the teacher's own pedagogical and instructional skills, and rued the wasted dollars spent on documenting the annual impact of poverty and race on student outcomes.

The subversion—Curious George was not nearly as dumb as I—was to entertain the idea that once the program gained traction, its simplicity, organizational flexibility, and value would change the daily routine that delivered education.

I dealt with hundreds of teachers. In fact, over time, as the reach of the project extended, I dealt with hundreds of graduate and undergraduate students and their professors (some English, some Education). They were almost to a man and woman, remarkable people, and they said things like, "We work in the trenches." For years when I looked at these highly committed, highly qualified people, I saw the capacity to do great things. What they saw when they looked at me was something I would deal with later, but the fact remains that I firmly believed these teachers—in one scenario—could have shut down every school house in the country to demand that bad schooling be replaced with good.

At first, of course, I was satisfied to simply remark *professionally* on the situation: the disparities and divisions among teaching and testing, schools and communities, Education and English, rural and urban, and so on. However, as we all watched these divisions deepen during the late 1990s with the implementation of an entirely new raft of federal and state accountability measures, I became more belligerent. Everyone knew on whose backs fell the harshest results, but no one did anything.

The conflict that irritated me most was the smug deployment of the African mantra—really, a defense of third world poverty—*it takes a village to raise a child*. This shield fronted the systematic destruction of every vestige of community carried out in its name. By the time the project ended, the state was closing all the small community schools and busing students to consolidated, big box districts and buildings. Teachers were required to spend more time preparing students for and giving tests; activities like tutoring were ended.

Whereas all that thousands of education officials—and the professionals in the schools and departments of English and Education, and in the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Education Association—could talk about were "villages," the villages inside their schools were being dismantled while the villages and neighborhoods and towns where people actually lived were losing the one center of community life that meant most to them.

It's not as though I had no conception of a big picture; after all, these were the reading list years of Derrida, Foucault, Said, and Freire, if not Hegel and Fanon. I had read these guys—and they were guys— to imply that picking apart power relationships is the first step to doing something, destabilization as a strategy rather than an end. But my guess is that none of these theorists had ever been in a rural southern school where not a lot of energy was spent rooting around for hidden agendas. As it happened, it was the occasion of my last "professional speech" that defined the obviousness for me and led me out of the door into which only the beckoning of an over determined Middle Eastern university could eventually lure me back.

The audience was the state chapter of a national reading association. Naturally, the members were 95% women. I was invited to tell the story of the tutoring project, a story with which many in the audience were familiar. I started the speech quietly, providing the usual narratives, anecdotes, and observations. But this time, as I had begun to do in the privacy of professional publications, I began to pull my punches. This was a room full of reading teachers. Why, I asked, in the name of poverty stricken children did experienced teachers like these bow to random mandates, participate in the destruction of communities, and adopt rigid and punitive pedagogies that surely did not raise the literacy levels of their students. What, I wanted to know, gave them the right to do damage when they knew better than those who told them to do it. They were *reading* teachers. Why did they act like illiterates who have no choice but to trust a boss man?

I have written elsewhere about what happened at the end of this tirade[4]. The room was rather quiet. There weren't any questions. When the conference chair dismissed us to lunch, and I started on my way through the crowd, an attractive, bustling teacher with a big handbag stopped me. She was digging in her bag, and she looked nonplussed but expectant. "Isn't this you?" she asked, pulling up a black-and-white paste-board photograph, the kind taken in the 1950s in the public schools I attended. The children were arranged in rows, their faces like postage stamps. "I knew when I saw your name in the program this had to be you," she said. "I have never had another Elspeth."

It was my first-grade teacher, the one who taught me and the twenty-four other small, six year old white students in her class every morning at her wooden desk at the front of the room to sound out vowels and consonants until we learned to read. Indeed, with the greatest sense of . . . what, irony? . . . I had walked into that same school building numerous times while working with teachers and students in the tutoring project, but this teacher had long ago moved to another part of the

state. The greatest irony, of course, is that 12 miles away, I had also walked into the one-room school building where innumerable African American elementary children learned to read at the wooden desk of their teacher while I was bused to town.

Mrs. Thompson smiled. "I look a little older now," she said. I could hardly speak. "Me, too," I sighed.

Courtenay Cazden, the eminent Harvard educator and teacher of literacy, once scribbled a note to me that said people who tear down education think they've accomplished something. She advised me to continue to work hard but to keep my tongue in my head. Of course, I wish I had listened, but there was more to it than that. The loggerhead I had now reached made me wonder what I was doing in Education, spelt with a big E, anyway. English with a big E seemed hardly more compelling. What was no longer tenable was my thinking that I knew the solutions for literacy, because I did not.

There is plenty to be done outside of education proper. For a few years, I left the university to work in organizations that supported social programs. I spent a great deal of time, for example, trying to sort out the adoption bureaucracy and to reconnect jumbles of funding streams to low-wage single mothers and their children. I also worked for a remarkable youth services organization that wanted nothing so much as to understand which of its wildly diverse programs was most effective, a search that led me to definitions and evaluations of effectiveness that, while far from perfect, certainly provided greater feedback and autonomy than standardized testing. I learned a new appreciation for "data," an appreciation that education had almost completely robbed from me. I also got paid more, which I liked.

But the middle of the night seems to be the time of epiphanies or crises or just staring at the walls, and one middle of the night on my side of the world turned out to be a morning in the east. Would I consider an English position in a start-up university for women in a country where women did not have routine access to a higher education? I could be an associate professor and work on writing-across-the-curriculum.

How could I not?

On the other hand, what did I expect?

In the Arabian Gulf region, I worked for two new universities. The first was a federal institution for women who graduate from high school with the highest marks. The facilities were state of the art. Every freshman woman began university with a laptop, an e-address, and an on-line course organizer. The chief disciplinary majors were business, media, and information science. A capstone experience was required, and there was a brilliant, credit-bearing "outcomes course" that trained young women to identify, benchmark, and evaluate their own progress.

There was also in the university library a secret room that housed the biology and art books containing pictures and photographs of naked people, birth canals, and oddly sexed angels hovering over Madonna and child. The *can-you-believe-this?* reaction of Americans and Brits wagging their heads was rather tempered in my case by the recollection of controversies in southern states over sex education manuals that depict genitalia or recommend birth control pills. In school districts where I had worked, members of the community who never roused themselves to attend a PTA meeting showed up in full force at boards-of-education meetings to threaten board members with hellfire and defeat in the next election if sex education were not dropped. Unless I miss my guess, this is not a controversy that will go away any more easily in the West than the East.

The second university where I worked was private and co-ed, but the genders attended classes in a bifurcated building. No state of the art here, the building was a modified furniture store. This university admitted students whose origins were elsewhere in the Arab world; in my classes were Egyptians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis, Omani, *and* national, e.g., native born students.

As usual, the national students were swaddled in black and white; however, the clothing of other Arab students ran the gamut. The non-national men tended toward western male grunge wear—dungarees, t-shirts, and, as they say in this part of the world, trainers on their feet. The non-national women shook their booties. Some did wear traditional scarves and skirts of many colors, but many wore low-cut blouses, hip hugging jeans, chains-as-belts, spike heels and boots, and elaborate make-up. Once, I had to keep averting my eyes from a very shy and buxom young student who occasionally wore a well-ventilated t-shirt until apparently someone advised her to wear a blouse underneath, which she did.

The effect of this mosaic was dizzying, and certainly there were many things to which I was not privy. Yet the revelation to me is that every time I tried to make sense of this alternate reality I fell into my own. As an undergraduate, *I* went to a women's college, and the first year, *I* had to

have a parent's permission to go off campus on a date. Of course, I wore blue jeans and raggedy t-shirts but my mother, who had gone to the same college, wore uniforms every day when she had attended. The semester preceding my graduation, the college admitted men for the first time in its history else it threatened to go out of business and throw us in the street. (It would be another twenty years before it occurred to a critical mass of voters that the state-run single-gender college for men was paid for by female tax-dollars, too, and the court case that females finally won cost millions and millions of everyone's taxes to sustain a last gasp of the state's patriarchy.)

In other words, the almost tactile conundrum of mixing literacy, female education, social backwardness (really, hiding Raphael is just as backward as refusing to print a picture of a condom), and nationalism caused me to interrogate almost every motive I have ever had.

A male student in flowing white robes (an angel?) would dash into my cubicle-sized office to say that his father has threatened him with death if I didn't change a C to an A; nine seconds later, a small, veiled and gloved girl would weep to say that her husband, a medical doctor, is on the way to see me because he has just returned from Canada and needs to know her grade; a few minutes later, another veiled young woman—riding a motorized scooter because she was born with a genetic malady—would stop by to drop off a revision of an essay that is already marked with an A+.

But these were not the confusions that held the greatest fascination for me. Indeed, the revelation that ultimately penetrated my consciousness in the Middle East was not about the contradictions and confusions of women and gender or the power of grades in the classroom *at all*. The revelation was the classroom, itself.

There is another wall in the land of English besides the Wall of Shame between English and Education. This wall, I discovered—which must make my ignorance legendary—separates English from the Teaching of English as a Second or Foreign Language (then known as TESL or TEFL).

Again, forgive my doltishness. The number of foreign language teachers who know about this wall is vast, and their behavior is completely justified. Not only are these teachers not-English and not-Education, they are not-tenurable. In higher education, teaching the English language to non-native speakers in their native universities proceeds like this.

First, the university constructs or co-opts a completely separate building or wing where it sets up language instruction *apart from the other disciplines*. Then, it crams as many second language teachers as possible into the smallest amount of space as possible, filling the classes with double and triple the optimum number of students. The TESL/TEFL teachers assume a substantially higher number of contact hours than is a usual load even for entry level faculty in English or Education, and they follow a traditional, 19th century hierarchy—or, one similar to recent hierarchies of literacy instruction in South Carolina—whereby students matriculate through levels of ability until the students achieve an acceptable score on a standardized exam.

The number of levels is not uniform, and rejiggering the levels is a fairly common practice. I taught at one university that had eight levels, reduced them to six, and then re-stored the originals as sub-levels. The same goes for the length of class periods as well as duration of the course—six weeks, ten weeks, sixteen? It is not unusual for the ESL students to follow a completely different schedule than the rest of the university.

Of course, by far the greatest numbers of students at the university in non-English speaking countries, such as the Middle East, are in the ESL classes. This is because students in their native country—at least this native country—are now being educated almost exclusively in English, the *lingua franca* of the marketplace and everything else (there is nothing other than the marketplace). It makes perfect sense, therefore, that these second language classes bear no credit, that the instructors are paid the least and given the most hours of the faculty, and that no one else in the university takes responsibility for language learning. What the rest of the faculty wants, in fact, is the timely delivery of highly literate, smoothly accomplished English speakers with lovely accents and good spelling.

The TESL/TEFL research and scholarship scene is not without its squabbles, of course. There is the hauntingly familiar debate pitting language acquisition against the value of performance, and there is an inexplicable allegiance to parsing skills into "listening," "speaking," "reading," "writing," and "grammar." The "theory" vs. "applied" debate also marks a big demarcation, one which seems to reflect teachers' pay grades rather than what students learn. That is, the applied crowd is paid less.

Of course, the matter of effectiveness—drumbeats in the distance—raises its specter. Indeed, there is a kind of two-faced gatekeeper operation going on here. On the one hand, the TESL/TEFL teachers, whom I began to call grasshoppers because they jump from country to country to suit their own lives and ambitions, have inverse power to their position. Although their stated goal is to produce the best English speakers and writers in the shortest amount of time, success means fewer

or less durable jobs for them.

On the other hand, as dedicated as the members of the professoriate are to keeping language teachers out of their buildings, they are beholden to these teachers to provide cut-off enrollments for academic courses. Thus there is always a struggle to determine who is most responsible—or irresponsible— for student performance. The result is a palpable rise and fall in student learning as practice responds to prevailing politics or, more likely, inertia rather than flexible teaching or, even, fidelity to success.

The quietest contradiction of all, however, seems to be replicated in every academic venue that has to do with reading and writing. To wit, despite the research, and there is plenty of it, no one really knows what works. On one extreme of this is James Sledd's infamous question regarding the paradigmatic shift in the composition field in the 1980's. "Would you," grouched Sledd, "buy a car from a salesman who hawked the process?"

Less to restore my credibility than my sanity when faced with situations such as these, I often went back to Mina Shaughnessy. Not only did Shaughnessy thirty years ago point out that English teachers are unable to teach writing to those who do not already know how to do it, but she also provided what she must have held as the motivation to learn to teach. A writer who searches for the right meaning, she said, "is doing more than retrieving words from his memory: he is advancing his thought," which is how I thought it worked for me. For example, in 2003 when Iraqi women held up misspelled, hand-printed placards protesting Donald Rumsfeld's policies, I (and everyone else in the Middle East) understood the meaning.

This promise, however, is the one that I appear to have forfeited, undermined, failed to deliver, or just stopped understanding. The (former) Secretary of Defense is to the point. Even if ideology is what it's all about, who in the linoleum halls of global education sets this gear in motion? For the life of me—and that is exactly what I mean—I cannot understand why an Ed.D. in English Education, a Ph.D. in Composition, and an M.A. in TEFL who work long into the night to mark papers and prepare curriculum don't cross paths during the day.

Clearly, I am getting less and less qualified. It gives me the absolute creeps, in fact, to acknowledge that no matter the value of my qualifications in a particular setting, they never quite seem to jibe with the mission. Perhaps it is like hiding one's body parts under a cloak in a society which markets women's youth and good looks. Who is really free in this picture? Indeed, even if I find the justification to cut myself some slack in a world of hurt and desperation, I have yet to find permission—or maybe it's just brains—to stop thinking that the answer will materialize if I stick with it. Unlike reading about how cool it is to live in the gap, or the fissure, or the sediment of meaning, there was no archeological—well, no geographical—rescue for me.

So when I realized the end to which this essay was making its way, the revelation inspired a kind of relief and direction that is compatible with life's dire ways. I needed less to wonder why the inexplicable seems to follow me wherever I go as to remember where in my perplexed life it all began.

About 55 years ago in a small, rural village in South Carolina lived Eliza Briggs, a black maid who worked in a white hotel that was located along a highway busy enough to keep her in a job for the rest of her life. One day, she was asked to sign a petition to sue the school district for discrimination, and, even though she did not have children in school, she signed. At the time, she and her fellow petitioners were most exercised at the refusal of the school district to pay for repairs on the used school bus that black parents had purchased to ferry black children eight miles to school.

"Well, she said, "when I was going, I had to walk two-and-a-half miles: cold, wet, just how you get there, you get there. You wet up, it rain, the whites pass by in the bus. And you be near a mud hole, they speed the bus up to wet you up. So I feel like our children need more education, more facilities, and a better education. So we decided, well, enough for our children, for all who need it. All over the world, let them enjoy some of the good things."

In retrospect, the consequences seem foregone.

"I was working at the Summerton Motel, and this man, he work us, Greenborough, he work us real good. And the White Council, they came down there and told him that, if he didn't fire the women who signed the petition, that they would close the business down. … So then he called us in, and asked all who that signed the petition, would we take our name off the petition in order to work. … I told him, no, I didn't want to do that, because we be hurting the children, and I rather give my job up, and keep my name on there. So in about two week's time, I was fired."

So there it all was, a simple case of lineage—race, gender, nation, language.

It's easy enough today for me to look back and see how the erasure of Black English became the

first goal in my pursuit of qualifications. It is less easy to understand why it has taken me half a century to recognize that Black English is the only language that ever had a prayer of saving me. What has relieved me of one qualification after another is not ideology but opportunity, the opportunity that cost Eliza Briggs her job.

In 1952, Briggs v. Elliott went to the Supreme Court as part of Brown v. the Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas. Fifty years later, the public schools in Summerton, South Carolina, participated in the literacy project I directed. When I met with the teachers to describe the project, some of them rolled their eyes. I was a white girl with a grant; where did I think the ideas of children tutoring each other came from? Yet we expanded the project year after year, until the school district collapsed under the weight of test scores, and, as described earlier, I did, too.

Today, the veritable purity of Eliza Brigg's vernacular Black English is virtually gone from South Carolina, as are the tobacco sheds and company stores—although Rick Ross and L'il Wayne and maybe, even, P. Diddy must *work themselves real good* to achieve language of similar (and dissimilar) grit. Eliza Briggs, herself, is an icon, her way with the third person singular enshrined in a principle that, unless I miss my guess, no longer requires explication.

Yet the truth is that the day after Eliza Briggs refused to remove her name from the petition to recognize the smallest modicum of fairness for black children—or, as she said, *children all over the world*—no one in all likelihood put forth the question that was most pressing to her life, presented her with a likely classified ad: "Can you clean bathrooms, make beds, wash sheets? If so. . ." Indeed, it would be decades and decades before the explanations of Eliza Briggs were sought, or her courage and the courage of her peers sufficiently recognized.

The truth is that I began this essay nearly a decade ago because the advertisement for smiling females on the Arabian Gulf offended me, *personally*. My first reaction—because I was looking for a job when I saw the ad—was *"How dare they?"*

Well, kiddo, they dare. The world still works to the advantage of people who already work it and those people, of whom Greenborough is a serviceable example, *work you real good* wherever and in whatever capacity they can. An even more general question—forgive me Barbara Ehrenerich for repeating the obvious—is why working women from Mississippi to the Middle East almost always find themselves in the crosshair of blame It has taken me years to stop asking myself why these women don't just stop wearing burkas just as Bill Clinton—a pork belly guy if ever there was one—got lots of mileage from nodding his grave head over welfare cheats who needed to wise up. The question, stupid, is not the clothes. The question is why the alienation of poverty is so easily dismissed.

So, putting aside the struggle with my own perplexity and personal sense of grief, what I am trying to get at is this: If language is not the linchpin to a better world and the people who teach and study writing are not on the ramparts, then what are we to learn from the actions of a young, black hotel maid in 1950 who executed the one literacy skill that would get her in trouble and did it, anyway.

Today, the professionalizing, in-fighting, ever increasing throngs of accommodating language teachers in the world, among whom I have counted myself every month I collect a check, seem unlikely to have the answer. Moreover, they, themselves, seem to possess the skills—despite the lip service—that are not the most valuable but the most *dispensable*.

Indeed, I hate to say it, but people like me (especially *younger* people like me) who come with the whole package—ESL, composition, theory, literature, research papers, basic language apps—are pretty attractive to employers who can dispense with one or two positions while the virtual language maid does whatever is needed to make students fluent and ready to fill the want ads.

It is the thought that I turn over in my mind when I wake up in the middle of the night: *being dispensable*. Certainly illiteracy continues to accrue to the millions of impoverished, dispossessed people, the fortunate among which turn themselves into economic refugees who labor in foreign countries to send home their monthly pay to feed children and pay school fees. Even in America, the most dispensable are high school drop outs.

You know what else I wonder in the middle of the night? I wonder who taught Eliza Briggs to write her name, who gave her the power to put herself and her job on the line?

This is when the faces of the people I have taught and the people who taught me jumble together. The endless rural roads merge with white, hot desert; ancient ivy-covered clock towers with old abandoned school houses; black veiled young girls and barefoot young black boys.

What is the connection between language and being dispensable?

It seems like such a simple question.

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Afghanistan.

Notes

[1] The United Arab Emirates

[2] This project was the South Carolina Cross-Age Tutoring Project.

[3] The project's indelible wisdom must be attributed to its founders and funders, Shirley Brice Heath and Dixie Goswami, paragons of service to children, teachers, and sanity in education.

[4] See "Reader Refunds" in *Writing to Make a Difference*, by Chris Benson ad Scott Christian (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002.

Provenance:

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