Partial Successes and Limited Failures: Recognizing the Dissonances in our Teacherly Talk

by Jane Greer

On a Thursday afternoon last fall, I sat through a particularly painful meeting with a group of my English department colleagues. We had assembled to discuss revising the writing course we offer for students interested in pursuing careers in business. The meeting became heated as some of my colleagues spoke passionately about the need to help students develop a “critical literacy” that would empower them to analyze, critique, and strategically challenge the role writing can play in maintaining existing corporate power structures. Other colleagues spoke equally passionately about the immediate economic needs of many of the students at our public, urban university, and they urged us to design a course that would provide students with an opportunity to master the conventions of the memos, letters, reports, and résumés that are traditionally used to communicate information in the business world. Rather than seizing the chance for a productive dialogue, we allowed the meeting to degenerate into a series of monologues in which everyone essentially claimed, “My politics are more righteous than yours; I am the one who truly has students’ best interests at heart.” The meeting ended with everyone feeling bruised and a little battered, and the existing business writing course, which satisfied no one, remained unchanged.

After the meeting, I was only too eager to pack up my book bag and flee the acrimony that hung in the hallway. As I headed across the parking lot to my car, I decided to treat myself to a quiet evening of reading—no raised voices, no hurt feelings, no painful charges among good friends and colleagues about who was the “bad” teacher. I would push aside the papers that needed grading—after all, I could just work extra hard over the weekend to make sure I got them back to my sophomore writing students on Monday. And besides, so many teachers that I knew through my work with Greater Kansas City Writing Project had been telling me that I just had to read Regie Routman’s *Literacy at the Crossroads*. They had talked about how uplifting Routman’s work was and gave credit to her for inspiring them to do things like initiate public portfolio exhibitions of their students’ work and to write op-ed pieces on educational issues for local newspapers. On that Thursday evening, I thought Routman’s book might be just the thing to chase away the despair I was feeling after the painful meeting about the business writing course.

At home, I pulled on a comfortable old pair of sweats and a ratty flannel shirt, and I settled into the corner of my couch with *Literacy at the Crossroads*. From the pages of her book, Routman exhorted me to “celebrate and publicize” my classroom “successes” and my “constant striving to do . . . [my] best for . . . [my] students” (xvi). After all, as Routman says, “if we don’t tell our ‘good news,’ no one is going to do it for us” (xvi). Dismayed that administrators and political leaders, who spend little time with kids in classrooms, are shaping the public discussions about issues like ebonics, whole language vs. phonic standards, English Only classrooms, and mainstreaming, Routman went on to talk about how teachers need “to move beyond our classrooms and schools into the wider public arena to state our case” (xvii). While part of me wanted to cheer enthusiastically and say “Yes! Yes!” to all that Routman argued, I could not chase the angry voices of my colleagues out of my head that evening. I wondered: How can we, as teachers, publicly celebrate our “successes” and those of our students when we can barely maintain a veneer of civility during a 90-minute meeting about revising a single writing course? How can we possibly enter public debates about literacy education when conversations amongst ourselves become so heated and unproductive? Why is it that discussions of educational issues, even among fellow teachers, so quickly become antagonistic and seemingly produce such self-righteousness among teachers whom I know to be generous, thoughtful, and tolerant people?

Troubled by such questions, I’ve turned in the past year to various sources in my search for answers. I’ve initiated one-on-one conversations with colleagues at my institution and at other schools, asking them why antagonism and accusations seem to creep so easily into conversations among teachers about how best to serve students’ needs. I’ve begun reading more widely, studying the work of feminist scholars on strategies for collaboration and coalition building; of political scientists on the concepts of community and public dialogue; of educational researchers on the issues surrounding teachers’ involvement in
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_Marian Wharton_ and the People’s College

Born in Bedford, Iowa, in 1877, Mayme (Marian) Lucy was a smart, bookish child. Though mocked by her brothers and cautioned that she would “never find a husband,” Marian enrolled at Drake University in 1894 (Le Sueur, 1984, p. 39). A year before she would have graduated, eighteen-year-old Marian married William Wharton, a Disciples of Christ minister. The couple eventually settled in Texas, but Marian refused to remain in an unhappy marriage where she and her children were considered the property of her husband. In the middle of the night, she fled with her three children over the state line to Perry, Oklahoma, where her mother lived. William Wharton eventually divorced Marian on the grounds that she read “dangerous literature” (Le Sueur, 1984, p. 41).

To support her family, Wharton began offering public lectures on women's rights, suffrage, and birth control (Allen, 1994, p. 120). On the lecture circuit, she met the leaders of many of the radical political groups of the Progressive Era. In 1914, Wharton joined with some of these leaders—Eugene Debs, Charles Steinmetz,
and Arthur Le Sueur—to launch the People’s College in Fort Scott, Kansas. As a correspondence school, the People’s College used the U.S. postal service to offer courses that included English, Law, Arithmetic, Algebra, Shorthand and Typing, Bookkeeping, and Penmanship. In the second year of its existence, the college was able to report that over 4,000 students were enrolled in various courses. Over 2,000 students were enrolled in the English course alone. For three years, Wharton helped lead the college. She served on the advisory board, edited its newsletter, and wrote the textbook for the beginning English course.

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**Story One: Plain English and Critical Literacy**

The founders of the People’s College wanted its working-class students to be able to tap into the power of language and to be able to write and speak effectively in union meetings, at political rallies, at local school board meetings, and in other public arenas. Marian Wharton was called upon to design a course that would help achieve this goal, and she produced a textbook, *Plain English*, to serve as the course’s foundation. For $12.50, a student would receive a copy of *Plain English* with its 30 lessons, beginning with “Nouns and Verbs” and proceeding through “Sentence Building” and “Punctuation.” Each lesson also included a spelling section with 30 words to be learned each week. To introduce each lesson, Wharton composed a letter addressing the student as “Dear Comrade.” Described by Wharton as “our weekly talks together,” these letters offered encouragement to the student and provided Wharton with an opportunity to explain her instructional theories.

Although *Plain English* is organized around the parts of speech and basic sentence structure, Wharton says in the first lesson that the course’s purpose “is not to make you a grammarian, versed in the knowledge of rules and reasons, but to give you the power to express yourself more readily, fluently, and correctly—in other words to speak and write good English” (1917, p. 9). Aware that traditional schools and methods of instruction had not given the readers of *Plain English* this power of ready, fluent, and correct expression, Wharton frequently addresses the unique needs of working-class students and attempts to frame the work of the course in terms familiar to them. The short, numbered paragraphs and brief lessons are designed for students who “will spend most of the day trying to meet bare subsistence needs” (p. 310). Recognizing the need to link the struggles of daily existence that occupied most of the students’ waking hours with their educational work, Wharton uses familiar references in her lessons: keeping a notebook in which to complete one’s lessons is likened to a mechanic having a workshop (p. 10), and prepositions are the nuts and bolts that hold sentences together (p. 190).

While *Plain English* thus speaks to the lives of working-class students, its lessons are also explicitly intended to empower these students much in the way today’s advocates of “critical literacy” might approve. In both the sentence-level exercises and the longer excerpts which students are asked to analyze in order to understand grammatical principles, *Plain English* carries messages of class consciousness and social critique. In early lessons on identifying complete sentences, the exercise sentences include: “The workers of the world build palaces for other people” and “Lo! Women are working and claiming their own” (p. 14; p. 20). In a later lesson, students are asked to complete partial sentences like: “The great need of the working class is . . .” and “By the sweat of no other’s brow shalt thou eat . . .” (p. 54).

Longer passages in *Plain English* come from authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Walt Whitman, Olive Schreiner, and Abraham Lincoln, and students are asked to analyze these passages for grammatical lessons. One lesson even asks students to identify every part of speech (nouns, pronouns, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions, and verbs) in three paragraphs from *The Communist Manifesto* (pp. 274-275).

While the exercises and reading passages in *Plain English* reflect Wharton’s commitment to bringing a unique curriculum to working-class students, she recognized that
deeper pedagogical innovations were necessary. The first of these innovations involved focusing on the principles of language use rather than on rules of grammatical correctness. The Foreword to *Plain English* explains this focus on principles and draws the following analogy:

* A mechanic may learn every detail of every rule for the construction of a steam engine, but if he lacks the understanding of the principles which give rise to the rules, they will avail nothing and his work must fail. If, however, he understands the principles involved, his work will stand the test, though he has no knowledge of rules as such.

In teaching the English language, the rules have been stressed, while the principles have been submerged, so that the teaching of rules has not resulted in the improvement of the student. (*Plain English*, np)

In *Plain English*, students thus learn principles governing standard English conventions rather than merely lists of conventions that students must memorize. For example, Wharton does not merely list rules for capitalization, but instead instructs students that capital letters are used to help readers recognize the most important words on a page. Another of Wharton’s strategies to reveal the principles behind grammatical rules and terms is to offer etymological explanations of the names of different parts of speech. In explaining adjectives, she notes:

> Adjective is a word derived from the Latin. It comes from the Latin word ad, meaning to, and the Latin word jecto, which means to throw; hence an adjective is a word thrown to or added to a noun. (p. 28)

By working to help *Plain English* students understand the principles behind the accepted conventions of language use, Wharton hopes to liberate students from the “useless worship of rules,” and she feels that only by understanding the principles could students effectively participate in questioning the utility of authority [and] … the utility of institutions” (np). Just as the ultimate goal of the People’s College was to promote such independent, critical thinking, so too did *Plain English* discourage students from accepting the status quo. As Wharton reminded her students,

> You are studying English that you may be able to say and write the things you think. So first of all, think, think! That is your unalienable right! Do not accept anything just by blind belief. (p. 88)

Never missing an opportunity to stress to students that they should be critically interrogating the social structures that leave them on the economic margins of society, Wharton even uses a punctuation lesson to observe that

> The interrogation mark is the most important punctuation mark. Asking questions is the source of all knowledge. The natural child is an animated interrogation point—full of questions. Cultivate questioning in yourself. (p. 311)

More, though, than merely questioning the world around them, Wharton wanted the working-class students to understand that they could shape the world around them. To achieve this sense of empowerment, *Plain English* explains the historical development of language and emphasizes that students can help shape the future of our continually evolving language. In her “Dear Comrade” letters, Wharton paints a “history of the alphabet” in broad strokes. She notes that ancient peoples supposed writing to have a divine origin and that this belief is understandable because it is natural to personify and envelope in mystery things we don’t understand, just as the Romans assumed that thunder and lightning was sent from Jove. In the early stages of literacy, then, reading and writing became the province of an elite class of priests and clergymen who kept writing for themselves.

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By limiting the access to literacy, these favored few enslaved the common people, according to Wharton. For her, the true emancipation for the world came with the invention of the printing press in the 15th century (p. 106). Wharton argues that as Gutenberg’s press helped literacy spread beyond the elite classes, languages became more dynamic and evolved more rapidly to meet the needs of the people, including the working class.

Since language has become increasingly changeable, Wharton wants her students to understand that they have a role to play in shaping the future of the language. She tells
them that “The study of language [is] ... an absorbing study of a living, growing, changing thing that mirrors forth the very life of man” and that the working class must participate in “writing history in words—adding new words (brotherhood, justice) and giving old words richer meaning” (p. 18).

Part of the remarkable legacy Wharton leaves for us today, then, is a model of literacy instruction that reflects a keen awareness of the unique experiences of a student population that has not been well served by conventional schooling. But equally fascinating are the sites of tension in Wharton’s work: places where the priorities of the world beyond the People’s College seem to determine what she imagines is possible and desirable for her students, and other places where her assumptions about the most effective writing strategies for engaging in the class struggle interrupt her attempts to create a curriculum that would empower the working class. Plain English is actually a complex interweaving of resistance to and compliance with the traditions of standard grammar.

**Story Two: Plain English Encourages Conformity**

According to Robert Connors, an obsession with mechanical correctness dominated writing instruction around the turn of the century. A growing immigrant population, changes in college entrance exams, and the nearly horrific workload under which English teachers labored fueled this obsession. Instructional materials on mechanical correctness proliferated, giving rise to what Connors has termed “The Great Handbook Boom” of 1907–1927. The purpose of all these handbooks and the instruction in the mechanical features of writing that they offer was to ensure the production of student writing that is easily and quickly read.

With its 30 lessons on topics such as the inflection of verbs, participles and infinitives, and adjective clauses, Plain English similarly focuses students’ attention on the mechanical aspects of producing clear and easily accessible texts. Though Wharton discounts the study of grammar and encourages her students to “strive for effective expression” (p. 41), the criteria for effectiveness in Plain English is ultimately the absence of error. Throughout Plain English, warnings about mechanical errors are interwoven with Wharton’s statements about liberating students from useless rules. Wharton particularly cautions students against incorrectly using “the s-form of verbs”: I goes, we farms, they buys (p. 61); using nonstandard pronouns such as hern, hisself, and orn (p. 131); using “them” as an adjective, such as them books, and them men (p. 156); and using “ain’t” (p. 107). Continually reiterating that “[c]ommon blunders in use of English mark us as careless or uneducated” (p. 61), Wharton places the Plain English students in a state of constant watchfulness against errors.

Furthermore, if it is mechanical correctness that marks a speaker or writer as educated, it is also an absence of error that makes a writer persuasive. Though profoundly committed to the class struggle, Wharton suggests that by complying with the rules of standard English, one is able to speak convincingly on the issues vital to the working class. She tells her students:

All of these mistakes take time to overcome, but the result is worth the effort for even those about us who will not take the pains or give the required time and effort to acquiring an education for themselves, will give greater heed to the speech of those who do speak correctly, and will readily acknowledge the leadership of those who have given the time and effort to self-development. (p. 131)

Wharton does acknowledge the sense of social dislocation many students experience as they sacrifice the language of their communities and move toward the standard, polished usage which Wharton links to further intellectual development. In one lesson, she encourages students to repeat aloud the correct forms of the verb “to be,” but then she adds: “Don’t think this is putting on airs. It is not. It is simply demanding the best for yourself in words” (p. 121). She also reminds students: “Don’t fear being a highbrow. Demand the best for yourself!” (p. 309). She places them in a position to either accept the standard language and advance their cognitive abilities or reject it and remain ignorant.

Part of the disturbing legacy Wharton leaves for teachers, then, is a model of how even the most progressive educational agendas can inadvertently cooperate with conservative interests in the broader culture. But this second story of how Plain English disciplines its working-class students is most interesting only when placed in relation to the first story of how Plain English empowers its students. Rather than attempting to “salvage” Wharton’s teacherly agenda by either integrating my
two contrasting stories of her work or to “fix” the contradictions by ultimately privileging one story over the other, I believe the value of these coexisting stories and their tensions lies in what they reveal about the challenges teachers face, regardless of whether they are working with students in the first decades of the 20th century or in the final decade of the 20th century.

In addressing her various audiences and their multiple needs, Wharton shifted among contradictory positions: encouraging working-class students to seize control of language, yet disciplining their unruly language practices so that critics of the labor movement could not dismiss them as ignorant; helping to define the mission of the People’s College as an institution that would teach students how to think, yet developing an English textbook that fits into the tradition of grammar guides that ask students only to fill in blanks; offering pointed critiques of the traditional educational establishment, yet designing a pedagogy that would allow working-class students to sound as though they too had spent years at in the classroom. In constructing two coexisting stories of Wharton’s work, my goal has been to foreground how her teaching life was a blend of new visions and old problems, partial successes and limited failures.

Conclusion
By allowing such multiple and contradictory stories of teaching and learning to coexist, I believe we can begin to have more balanced discussions about language instruction both with our colleagues and in public arenas. Just as Wharton’s voice in Plain English moves among a range of radical and conservative registers that reflect her personal commitments as well as broader influences, so too our own teacherly talk is never fully our own: it is freighted with competing languages, some of which may reverberate at frequencies so low and subtle we may have difficulty hearing them ourselves. When we deny this complexity in our talk about teaching and instead represent our work with students as perfectly consistent, coherent, and contained, we oversimplify the challenges of teaching and, thus, increase the likelihood that people will gravitate toward extreme, perhaps unrealistic, positions. In retrospect, it seems to me that this is what happened when my colleagues and I discussed how to teach a writing course for students interested in business careers.

As we become accustomed to the dissonances we hear in the stories of our predecessors in literacy instruction, we might begin to acknowledge and accept the tensions in our own practices not as contradictions that must be resolved but as opportunities for further inquiry, inventiveness, action, risk-taking, and revision. In making visible for our fellow teachers and for the wider public our own energetic negotiations among competing languages, we might begin to move beyond the acrimony that sometimes creeps into our discussions with colleagues and begin to defuse the unproductive volatility that surrounds public debates about issues like ebonics, English Only classrooms, mainstreaming, and national standards. Even more importantly, we might begin to serve as productive models for our students, who inevitably find themselves similarly negotiating among various languages both inside our classrooms and in the wider worlds beyond the schoolyard.

References


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