

## **Critical Language Awareness and Student Vulnerability: The Case for Contextual Rhetorical Propriety**

**Cole Bennett**

Abilene Christian University

In a recent article in *College English*, Rebecca Lorimer Leonard (2021) presented findings from a qualitative study designed to reveal students' critical language awareness (CLA) already at work in writing. She then asked composition teachers to continually consider writers' local contexts, from assigning "writing activities that provide analytic distance" that cause writers to "become differently aware of the language prestige, legitimacy, variation, and discrimination they intimately know" to "structuring writing activities . . . grounded in [students'] families and communities" (p. 192). Lorimer Leonard urged readers toward a new attention to students' varied backgrounds; having students explore their "collected family narrative" yields a more critical perspective than traditional literacy autobiographies because it gives writers more grounding in their local contexts (p. 193).

Context and "the local" figure heavily in discussions of CLA, most of which demand critique of, and remedy from, the power of Standard Written English (SWE), or similarly named elite dialect prevalent in educational settings. Emma R. Britton and Lorimer Leonard (2020) have argued that making students aware of their own prejudices and biases toward language use can lead to empathy and social justice: "CLA shares common ground with the translingual composition movement," specifically "common intellectual and emancipatory interests. Both movements allow for questioning the upholding of language standards in the writing classroom" (p. 3). Moreover, in an article on antiracist pedagogy, Eric C. Camarillo (2022) asked readers to value students' local contexts even when commenting on writing, arguing that "written feedback can and should be a vehicle for the equitable treatment of students, fostering respect for students' home discourses, and cultivating agency in the students themselves" (p. 21).

In short, though they are different concerns, each with its own academic and cultural histories, CLA, translingualism, antiracist teaching, or their various intersections, unite to suggest that greater attention paid to our marginalized students' local contexts can lead to linguistic justice. Understanding and accounting for the sociocultural foundations from which students enter formal educational systems, the proponents claim, can lead language arts teachers (and specifically compositionists) to better make room for linguistic variance and thus enact a more justice-based pedagogy.

The concerns for justice in the language arts are certainly not new. Since the 1974 "Students' Right to Their Own Language" resolution, compositionists have been trying to find the best way to advocate for the inclusion of non-prestigious dialects while recognizing the value of fluency with SWE. A wide variety of perspectives toward this topic has been offered, examples of which highlight broad linguistic truths about language (Horner et al., 2011; Perryman-Clarke et al., 2015; Young, 2010); encourage the use of home dialects or languages in early drafts for an otherwise academic prose-based writing class (Bizzell, 2014; Elbow,

2002); call for the field of composition to expand its design toward broader linguistic parameters (Gilyard & Richardson, 2001; Jordan, 2012; Young, 2009); or mobilize faculty and staff through organized development initiatives (Ozias & Godbee, 2011; Weaver, 2019). Despite this rich scholarly profusion, and even edited collections designed specifically to move from theory to praxis (Horner & Tetreault, 2017; Kiernan et al., 2021; Young & Martinez, 2011), the best way forward for a writing teacher remains unclear; graduate students in two successive iterations of my Contemporary Composition Theory course have emerged from such readings stymied between sincere social justice motives and a respect for a rhetor's local audience in and beyond the academy.

I wish to accept the invitation to respect and carefully consider the consequences of local linguistic environments. In this essay, I intend to fold attributes of moral philosophy into a response to these streams of CLA scholarship, which continue to grow apace in the field of Composition and Rhetoric. Doing so, I will argue, reveals a significance of local contexts akin to those above but with a markedly different relationship that I call "contextual rhetorical propriety." My position is not that tools of CLA have *no* value for writers but that our field's top-down emphases on translingual and antiracist pedagogy are eliding important considerations of propriety—considerations themselves built almost entirely on speakers' and writers' own local circumstances. Revisiting the life and publications of Enlightenment rhetorician Adam Smith, while carefully examining the vulnerability writers always face, can shed new light on these current topics, leading us to a more student-centered classroom based on linguistic empowerment.

Owing to his fame as "father of political economy" (Golden, 1968, p. 200), Smith might be deemed a more relevant figure in schools of business than departments of rhetoric, an oversight that I believe would diminish his many contributions to the liberal arts. Indeed, his (1971) *Lectures in Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, highlighting his career as a teacher of rhetoric, makes him "one of us" in composition studies; given his other writings, we can assume that he kept moral philosophy top of mind even as he lectured in university settings and wrote about persuasion and making claims. Influenced by his close friend David Hume, Smith wrote quite a bit about the subjects of propriety, sympathy, and moral social relationships during the Enlightenment era. Smith's (1962) famous *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* has garnered the larger share of attention in public life than *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2013), but the latter has far more to say about how humans treat one another. Smith maintained therein that humans operate from two basic motivations: we desire at all times to be both praised and praiseworthy, seeking to gain love from those around us while inhabiting legitimate reasons to be worthy of such love. These twin motivations extend to all markets of our lives, not just in the economic realm. Smith presented humans as independent agents acting to bring about these simultaneous results of praise and praiseworthiness from others in the overarching market of sentiments—whether greeting people they pass in the street or selling them cuts of meat for their dinner.

I would argue that what needs more prominence in these discussions of our writing students' local contexts are substantive considerations of propriety—not with respect to a certain faith or psychological framework but to propriety arising organically from local social constructs. As Aristotle did in ancient Greece (Kennedy, 2006, p. 5), Smith taught rhetoric both in academic and community settings (Howell, p. 397). In the latter, he helped local Edinburgh speakers and writers who signed up for lessons better inform, persuade, and delight their lay audiences, whoever they were. Key to his instruction was this deference to

propriety, brought on by respect for not only actual interlocutors but also a fictive being called the Impartial Spectator. This “man of the breast” acts as an imaginary listener who channels a culturally constructed set of protocols to help judge discourse among speakers (or writers) and their audiences—a perpetual eidolon who helps a person navigate the market of sentiments via continual adjustments to contextual appropriateness. In sum, the Impartial Spectator serves as an outward check to keep the rhetor aligned with the inward goals of being praised and praiseworthy inside a given social moment.

To illustrate and explore my own experience with rhetorical propriety, and to answer the call to reflect on local contexts, I will present two items from my own educational past. The first is a vignette from not only my rookie college year, but actually the *first day* of my *first class* of my *first semester* in 1985. The course was Speech 101, and my professor was an older instructor whose primary ethos came from a 40-year career as a professional radio broadcaster. He taught communication at the community college in my hometown; he was delightful, idiosyncratic, and eccentric, and his students were quizzically fond of him. On that first day, he began asking some general questions of this roomful of first-year students to get to know us, and when I raised my hand and began to answer, he interrupted me midsentence:

“Do you always talk out of the side of your mouth like that?” he asked, not unkindly.

“Pardon me?”

“I said, do you always talk out of the side of your mouth?” he repeated.

“I . . . don’t know,” was all I could stammer.

Having grown up in East Texas, I had no doubt that my jaw was slack, but I had never been presented with this fact in such a direct—and public—manner. Mr. Birdsong was not insulting me in spirit but literally asking “if that’s how I usually spoke.” It absolutely was. As the course syllabus unfolded that semester, and we submitted speeches on cassette tapes after delivering them in class, he would comment in writing on each canon of rhetoric, including copious notes to me on my vocal delivery: “MEHN” for “men” and “STRINNG” for “string,” he wrote. I started to pay close attention to these suggestions, which I regarded as suggestions from an expert rhetor with a solid background of successful oratory. All of this new learning was coincidentally reinforced by my friend Brett, who had the coolest job I could imagine at age 18—a radio broadcast personality. When I asked him once if there were any uncovered on-air shifts at his station, he just smiled and said, “Well . . . we’d need to work on your talking first.”

And work on my talking I did from that moment forward. As I finished my bachelor’s degree and settled into the world of business and marketing, I experienced countless opportunities to present ideas, interact transactionally with management and clients, and work alongside colleagues from all over the United States. I habitually monitored both my output and feedback as I spoke, not to hide my identity as a U.S. Southerner, but simply to shift my oral delivery to a place less distracting and more in line with my audiences’ expectations. In other words, I continually sought to better address my rhetorical situation in ways that had begun in my first college speech class and had continued each moment thereafter.

When I enrolled in English graduate studies several years later and started presenting academic papers at conferences, I would meet people from all over the United States who

could not easily discern where I had grown up. Ohio? Indiana? The Plains? While others had no trouble detecting a southern flavor to my enunciation, it was no longer so noticeable as to draw attention from, say, career broadcast elocutionists or local radio DJs. I had, stated plainly, taken pains to “reduce my accent,” both in literal terms (aural variances) and analogue terms (use of pointed regionalisms). In just a few years, I had virtually removed “fixing to” (meaning “preparing to” or “commencing presently”), “ma’am” (as a generic term of respect), and “y’all” from my parlance, and I learned to pronounce my vowels more “vertically” than “horizontally.” I was not compelled to make these changes by any external forces; I chose these actions as a response to what I felt would garner more positive regard from audiences in my local contexts.

The second item, an insight arising from a unique reading, comes about ten years later. I matriculated through graduate school in the mid-1990s, earning both an MA and a PhD during a time when Mike Rose’s (1989) *Lives on the Boundary* was enjoying significant traction in English seminars related to language arts education, literacy, and working-class pedagogy. I found (and still find) the book riveting—a great read overall and an inspiration to my colleagues and me who have chosen Rhetoric and Composition as our professional field. *Lives* is much more than autobiography; Rose used his unique school experiences as a street-smart boy in the Los Angeles area and his early professional life as a teacher “in the trenches” to make several nuanced arguments about the successes and failures of American education. Each chapter, while contributing its own unique message, built a two-sided scaffold of educational critique and promise.

I want to juxtapose a poignant moment in Rose’s (1989) text against my own experience as a first-year college student on that first day of speech class. In a late pericope in Chapter 5, Rose recounted an experience with a group of native Spanish speakers whom his Teacher Corps team had been teaching for several weeks. He had used some then-unorthodox methods to try to make learning to write more relevant for his pupils, and those strategies had paid off in ways that spread joy throughout everyone involved. On the last day, one of them presented Rose with a greeting card to thank him:

He wished me well and hoped that I found myself “enchanted with life”—a beautiful way to say that he wanted things to go well for me. He wrote further about several classmates we both liked and then closed with . . . a respectful gesture to the language teacher and a reminder of how intimidating the use of written language can be. (p. 131)

The awkward part, Rose noted, was that the card was actually a *sympathy* card with “a tableau of praying hands on the front [and] ‘praying God will comfort you’ on the inside” (p. 131). The motivation behind the gesture was poignant and pure, but the card was a clear social infelicity given the context of the moment; it was a gaffe, a blunder. The consequences were not overbearing—maybe some embarrassment (for both parties), maybe some disappointment on Rose’s part that his lessons in English did not prevent this mishap—but nobody was injured or died or lost their job because of it. Rose’s students simply had proffered a piece of discourse that violated the linguistically pragmatic norms of its rhetorical situation.

I saw traces of myself in those pages: my regional verbal performances as a young college student did not return physical beatings, rescinded invitations to social events, or

incarceration, but they did diminish my *ethos* in the eyes of many listeners in ways that I found unwelcome and worthy of revision. People regarded me, at various moments, as less educated, less serious, or perhaps less refined—a hayseed. While perfectly natural parlance in rural East Texas with my family and friends, my twang-laden style and delivery interfered with my messages to many larger discourse communities to which I aspired, *even though semantic meaning was often preserved*. I was faced with a sociolinguistic truth whose genesis was unknown to both my interlocutors and myself, and frankly, was irrelevant to the hard truth at hand: my discourse often fell outside the boundaries of contextual rhetorical propriety. In order to gain the praise and praiseworthiness of my audiences, then, I thus chose to take measures to place myself in a more favorable position given the parameters of my evolving rhetorical situations.

Such local rhetorical contexts with students are precisely my concern. Writing teachers occupy a curious moment when calls for deemphasizing (if not divesting) SWE grow increasingly louder in the name of CLA, translanguaging, and/or antiracist pedagogy. However, these views are not without criticism related to their corresponding sacrifices and trade-offs. As Erec Smith (2020), author of *A Critique of Anti-Racism in Rhetoric and Composition*, noted, “Anti-racist endeavors in rhetoric and composition operate from a deficit-model of empowerment. That is, whether consciously or inadvertently, we frame our students and ourselves as powerless victims fighting hegemonic forces for power” (p. 57). I, too, worry that scholars continually portray some writers as “caught” or “mired” in a place beyond which they can pivot to learn new and important dialects that can serve their larger rhetorical aspirations. Or else these writers are seen to be cast by force into implacable education systems that prevent them from progressing and flourishing authentically as members of their communities of origin. Elite dialects that rose to power outside these marginalized writers’ lives, such scholars have concluded, should not then be foisted upon these students. But if we believe that rhetoric has power to be subversive, sly, and counter-hegemonic, surely we recognize that it cannot effect such large-scale changes without the rhetors’ keen command of powerful discourse. Such understanding is precisely why the majority of antiracist scholarship, whose very collective purpose gestures toward comprehensive change, appears in peer-reviewed professional journals written in academic prose.

Students in our universities embody Adam Smith’s twin motivations in multitudinous ways, from joining Greek clubs to volunteering off-campus to deciding which majors and minors to pursue. They seek lives that will ultimately bring them praise and praiseworthiness, at all times recognizing and responding to notions of propriety within their social contexts—including rhetorical ones. When they enroll in writing courses, we ask them to reveal their worldviews, biases, values, and virtues as they advance claims, thus becoming vulnerable to judgments from their professors and peers. In *Provocations of Virtue: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing*, John Duffy (2019) characterized such vulnerability this way:

Whenever we put pen to paper, or sit before the keyboard, or rise to speak for the purpose of making an argument, we subject ourselves to the evaluation of others. We put a proposition before our readers or listeners and invite them... to make a judgment about our ideas, our values, even our character as individuals. (p. 116)

In my 25 years of teaching composition, I have seen this vulnerability manifested in many ways, from horrified looks when I mention an upcoming class-wide peer review to overwrought, passive prose that tries to deemphasize agency from writers' claims. I would surmise these phenomena are common among others who also teach rhetoric, whether writing, speech, or digital discourse. Revealing one's rhetorical aims engages risk.

Some authors have held that vulnerability can help writing become more persuasive (Owen, p. 90), can help writers grow in their embrace of process (Anderson, 2017), and can even be produced discursively in student writers (Johnson, 2014); others have treated this topic in helpful ways I will not rehearse exhaustively here (see, for example, Brantmeier & McKenna, 2020; Lockhart, 2019). Rather, I will argue that when scholars advocate for composition teachers to stop emphasizing the many roles of, and deferring instruction to, dialects of power, they ignore an integral component of the courses they criticize—the students themselves and the vulnerability they are embracing. And while these scholars would argue that writing teachers should investigate students' family contexts to further understand “discriminatory language values” (Leonard, 2021, p. 193) or to “prepare students to carefully negotiate demanding respect for their own language . . .” (Gere, et al., 2021, p. 393), I would contend that disregarding the expectation of SWE by high-stakes readers actually places the students in far more vulnerable straits. To forsake a discourse so valuable to myriad audiences is to shun the influence of Smith's Impartial Spectator, whose goal remains to help rhetors gain purchase in their own markets of sentiment—including linguistic markets. Gere et al. (2021) charged that certain “field-orienting documents” (p. 384) that articulate goals and outcomes for college writing students “position the compositions of minoritized writers as inappropriate, inferior, or error-laden” (p. 390); I would revise these pejorative predicate adjectives to instead read, quite simply, “not audience-based.”

To some degree, the Impartial Spectator acts as Lady Philosophy did for Boethius (1973) in the 12th-century essay *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Awaiting death in prison, Boethius abstracted his dialogist to all but sit physically in his cell with him and offer support, refutation, and, at times, scolding. This personification of a discipline of thought helped Boethius build his argument that one (especially himself) should not expect to enjoy the good fortune life offers without the corresponding and inevitable downturn inherent in the design of Fortune's wheel. As Boethius' self-character wends his way through the lamentations of his situation in *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy checks his arguments at every turn, keeping him from straying too far from the appropriate understanding of life's machinations; his doldrums tempt him to mourn too harshly for a man of his import, but she is there for instant critique and correction.

In a similar fashion, Smith's Impartial Spectator can serve as a critical agent to help bring about in the classroom contextual rhetorical propriety and clear the gridlock wrought by the competing motivations in our scholarship. This imagined interlocutor sits as an ever-present onlooker who exerts influence over a rhetor's discourse decisions, providing innumerable feedback subtleties in the process. While a speaker or writer must always compose toward their audience to be successful, Smith (2013) argued that the presence of this shrewd companion yields propriety to the mix (p. 96). But unlike Lady Philosophy, whose presence and purpose resided in the mind of one man (Boethius), the Impartial Spectator embodies to every rhetor an infinite number of cultural and societal nuances to

consult in a given situation. In other words, it derives from culture itself. Hence, a wise writer will attend not only to a professor's prompt directly to gauge the appropriate prose to employ to create meaning, but also to this rhetorical ally who observes from a critical distance to help a rhetor select style, tone, scope, and other elements of discourse. While Smith's treatment of this figure emphasized its subconscious assistance, I would argue that attending carefully and explicitly to the Impartial Spectator's role facilitates critical thinking in a rhetor's creation of discourse.

As writing teachers, we can know quite a few things about language systems, marginalized literacies, and histories of racism, but we cannot know more about our writers' aspirations than they do. If students are signing up for college courses that teach them to compose evidence-based arguments via an academic style, even one whose rise to elite status is disfavored, then we should not undermine the very material they seek to master; doing so constitutes a misuse of time and effort. It is a mistake to subvert longstanding rhetorical curricula precipitated via decades of both academic and cultural vetting and exchange them for instructional paradigms based on what Erec Smith (2020) called "the primacy of identity," that is, "rhetoric meant to disrupt an audience to see the world in a certain way" (p. 4). We who teach rhetoric should not allow a hyperfocus on identity to blind us to the vulnerability students will experience when they are unable to deftly respond to their discursive exigencies. A writer's identity constitutes one important facet of the rhetorical situation; it should not deny access to the other facets.

One final return to Mike Rose's (1989) book illustrates this point. In the penultimate chapter of *Lives on the Boundary*, entitled "The Politics of Remediation," Rose wrote about a bilingual student named Lucia and the higher-ed triumphs she experienced despite the troubles related to her marginalized home belief systems. As he closed his profile of this tenacious woman, he commented on the difficulty she faced each day just getting to campus and attending classes:

The baby couldn't wake up sick, no colic or rashes, the cousin or a neighbor had to be available to watch him, the three buses she took from East L.A. had to be on time—no accidents or breakdowns or strikes—for travel alone took up almost three hours of her school day. Only if all these pieces dropped in smooth alignment could her full attention shift to the complex and allusive prose of Thomas Szasz. (p. 185)

The upshot here is that Lucia's life was unlike her classmates' who had an easier time shifting their focus from life to schoolwork. Rose's implicit argument, built throughout his previous chapters, is that Lucia's logistical difficulties and academic expectations are unfair given that her educational past and contexts have been thoroughly less-than. However, neither Rose, nor I, nor anyone else can know more about Lucia's goals for her life than she did. Critical language scholars may feel strongly that Lucia was struggling through systemic contrivances that marginalized her, discounted her Hispanic heritage, ignored her home literacies, and propped up hegemonic colonial systems via the reading and writing assigned to her. Twenty-first-century anti-racism scholars would likely castigate any curriculum that required her written work to conform to SWE and logical argumentation. But Lucia was an adult who makes incalculable individual decisions for her own returns. In fact, I would make the case that Rose's portrayal revealed instead a young woman who found ways to successfully

manage her life while navigating all manner of troublesome hurdles to pursue a degree in psychology for her brother's sake. In Adam Smith's (1967) language, Lucia pursued higher education because being a degreed professional who helps her mentally challenged brother comprised a worthwhile investment of her time and effort that would, in her estimation, eventually yield praise and praiseworthiness in her life. Who are we to argue, for our own reasons, that she should resent these efforts? Who are we to say that her professors, having assigned research papers in APA style with thesis-driven arguments in SWE prose, were oppressing her inside a system in which she should have stopped participating or else spent what little time she had protesting?

Having now taught for years at a university in Texas, where most of the students hail from within a regional radius, I would likely be forgiven quite a margin of rural vocabulary and southern brogue by my daily audiences. Still, I note my own linguistic output is far more "centered" than those of many of my students, some of whose goals mirror mine decades ago. I don't teach speech, but I do teach first-year composition, business writing, technical and scientific writing, and graduate courses in Rhetoric and Composition. All of these, of course, center on advancing arguments, the centuries-long centerpiece of Western rhetoric that encapsulates so much about humans' meaning-making impulse. Duffy (2019) contended, "To teach claims is to teach writers and readers how to make judgments about whether to trust, how and when to make themselves vulnerable to trust, how to be trustworthy themselves . . ." (pp. 100-01). Like Mr. Birdsong did in 1985, I try now to guide my students to think about their own accents—their written ones—in light of trust. I talk about audience and genre, and I advise them on "what it takes to be successful" to particular readers. Corporate business readers may differ from university readers in some ways, but they expect, along with technical and academic journal readers, some version of SWE that manifests a tone and voice little marked by nonstandard or idiosyncratic features. Some students may find this direction initially off-putting or offensive to portions of their identity. However, I must keep writers' long-term rhetorical success and its associated vulnerability in mind as they seek their own paths forward, and these elements demand prioritizing contextual rhetorical propriety.

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