

Article

# Opening Up Contested Spaces: Interdisciplinary Writing at an Historically Black College or University

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## Introduction

Inequalities in academic writing are not uncommon in higher education and become more complex when we look at the landscape of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which serve many first-generation Black students. HBCUs serve minority students and provide a cultural connection they often do not achieve at predominantly white institutions. Such first-generation students face a range of challenges and graduate at lower rates than other students. In terms of academic writing, such students often struggle to develop an academic identity and voice. At Johnson C. Smith University, an HBCU in the heart of North Carolina, all students, regardless of major, are required to complete a senior investigative paper. Many students struggle with this graduation requirement for a variety of reasons, ranging from inexperience with academic writing, lack of interest in the topic, to poor writing mechanics skills. This article focuses on specific lessons learned from our experience working with HBCU seniors majoring in interdisciplinary studies as they develop topics and write their Senior Investigative Papers (SIPs). Specifically, we address practices of content feedback, issues of topic selection and development, and strategies to allow students to better develop their own academic writing voice, all with the aim of promoting engagement with academic writing that helps to close the gap of academic inequality that many students experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to online learning brought into focus many inequities that were often overlooked, even at an HBCU, as students previously had more access to their instructors

and resources. While this paper focuses on both online learners and traditional face-to-face learners, the authors realized the larger issue of authorship and social expectations hindered students during the development of their Senior Investigative Paper. The goal quickly shifted to creating students as “experts” of their experiences, or as Poe (2022) notes, “Allowing students to draw on their own funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005)” (p. 176). While we are not arguing or stating that students should not produce high quality academic papers, what we do argue is that instructors need to foster pride in students’ writing that allows them to develop their voice and share their expertise. Envisioning students as experts in their own experience and particular interdisciplinary path of study, rather than novices who need to be taught to conform to standard or academic English, yields important advantages for HBCU students.

In this essay, we explore what Poe (2022) calls “options” and “border thinking” (p. 166) in the various university writing contexts—the classroom, the student conference, and specifically our institution’s required capstone paper. Like Poe, we are not proposing a grand theory or overarching solution to the conflicts raised in our students’ grappling with and resistances to standard “Academic English.” Rather, we are documenting a series of cases and practices that have developed within our interdisciplinary studies program as we attempt to explore options, rethink notions of what counts as “proper” academic writing, and allow our students more room at the borders of the disciplines they are exploring to develop alternative styles and voices. Rather than being overly focused on students learning to adhere to Standard Academic Writing, we describe here our own tentative attempts to “unlearn” how we have been taught to teach writing.

We are defining standard “Academic English” following work by Lippi-Green (2012) on the ideologically constructed and discriminatory nature of such idealized conceptions and research on standard language ideologies and standard edited American English (SEAE) (see McSwan, 2020; Milroy, 1999; and Davila, 2016). Such ideologies, according to Davila (2016), “allow for the belief in one, identifiable and stable language variety that is inherently correct” (p. 128) and enforce the idea that standard language “must be perceived as unaffiliated. *All* groups stand to benefit from using the standard language variety, and no group has more access than any other to the standard language” (p. 129). In the context of an HBCU, these ideologies are often reinforced by faculty and administrators and imposed on students in complex ways. Such commitments to the ideology of standard edited American English are problematic, in that they try to “fix” HBCU students by

“increasing ‘access’ to whiteness (i.e., opportunity to learn) to marginalized students” (Randall, 2021; quoted in Poe, 2022, p. 5).

## **Background**

In the early 1990s, Johnson C. Smith University instituted a Senior Investigative Paper (SIP) as a requirement for graduation<sup>1</sup>. This capstone project takes a variety of forms across departments and disciplines. Students in STEM fields often perform and report experimental research. Many disciplines have, over time, developed very specific formats within which the students work. Some social science disciplines require survey research using fellow students. Business majors often research and write analytical profiles of public companies, assessing future opportunities and challenges. Performing and visual arts students create artistic projects with associated papers that contextualize and give background for the project.

Interdisciplinary studies has faced several challenges in approaching the Senior Investigative Paper. Interdisciplinary studies majors fashion unique academic course plans early in their major, combining two or more disciplines. These disciplines often represent disparate disciplinary methodological traditions: biology and business, or human services and religion, for example. Interdisciplinary Studies faculty, currently fully represented by the two authors of this paper, face the ongoing challenge of teaching the junior and senior seminar courses in which students develop and write their Senior Investigative Papers. Advising and mentoring students working across a vast range of disciplines and traditions outside of our areas of expertise represents a distinct challenge: we cannot limit the content to a specific format or methodology, nor are we in a position, often, to lend extensive disciplinary expertise in the development of topics.

Another issue we have faced stems from the demographics of our students and the attendant challenges they face. Interdisciplinary Studies is one of a few programs offered in both traditional and online formats. As such, a large percentage of our students are non-traditional, online students. These students are often older adults, working full time, who have returned to the university to complete a degree after having been away from the academic environment for many years, often decades. Few of these students are contemplating graduate studies but are seeking the credential of an undergraduate degree within the context of professions they already inhabit. Many of our students are first-generation, most are African American, and a significant number are non-traditional and

online. Each of these demographics represents specific associated challenges (see Engle and Tinto, 2008; Grabowski et al., 2016; Soria and Stebleton, 2012; Rauch, 2020); when combined, these challenges are often exacerbated. As such, the Senior Investigative Paper can become a daunting and dispiriting task, and many students (both traditional and non-traditional, ground and online) find the project as a major barrier to graduation.

Our response to these challenges has been to formulate the Senior Investigative Paper project within interdisciplinary studies as a rather traditional “research paper,” representing secondary rather than primary research. The onus of responsibility for topic selection is on students, as only they understand the interdisciplinary connections across the disciplines they have chosen to combine in their major. Students isolate and research a problem or issue that can be explored and addressed from their unique perspective.

A key focus for interdisciplinary studies students, and one we stress across the core courses, is that developing a more comprehensive understanding of the problem through their research is acceptable. They are not considered experts in their fields of study, but rather have adequate knowledge to research the question they have developed. As part of the interdisciplinary studies major, students need to know the epistemologies, methodologies, and perspectives of their chosen disciplines. Students are asked to learn disciplinary jargon and incorporate it into their knowledge base. It is important that they see where the disciplines discuss the topic under study, how they approach the topic, and how the two (or more disciplines differ in addressing the problem. The next step, and goal of the SIP, is to produce a research paper that integrates these disciplines on some level. This integration can be achieved by developing a more comprehensive understanding of the problem and showing how the disciplines need to meet to address the problem or where another problem develops from the disciplines not working together.

A specific goal in interdisciplinary studies has been to have students develop a topic they find interesting and engaging. Many interdisciplinary studies students choose topics that address inequalities they have encountered and endured or ones specific to their demographic (age, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). We have found that when students are able to research and write on topics about which they are passionate, their writing shows marked improvement as they develop a writing voice. As Bean (2011) notes, sometimes it is beneficial to set aside the formal academic writing expectations and focus on the content and context of a paper, which provides students with the message that what they are researching is valuable. As a result, they gain confidence in their

research skills and critical thinking skills. Bean also notes that when we focus on content rather than sentence-level correctness, the result is often a well-written paper, or one that is improved from the previous drafts. Improvement is the focus in our department, especially when students have no desire to attend graduate school. It is important that this graduation requirement be a product they are proud of, feel that they have contributed to the conversation, and that their voices (which is often stifled) has been heard.

We have found this approach to be valuable, which we discuss in the following sections. One common pedagogical response to the challenges students have faced across Johnson C. Smith University in writing senior papers has been to *close the field* of possible topics and formats<sup>2</sup>. Templates and rubrics are distributed and specific guidelines for the format and content of each section are made clear. A common and useful scaffolding approach, it often works well in freshman writing classes—students learn to do academic writing by examining models and performing focused tasks that are constituent parts of a larger whole. (see Pessoa, Mitchell, & Reilly [2019] for an example of such scaffolding in the discipline of history). Rather than move towards more scaffolding (templates, prescribed methods, topics, etc.) for our senior investigative papers, we instead open up to allow students more agency in choosing topics and approaches that resonate more with their experiences and situations. Such an approach coincides with Poe's (2022) recommendation: "Seeing assessment as a form of social action—not as a set of best practices—helps me unlearn what I have been taught about evaluating student performances" (p. 179). While we may want to correct every grammatical error or sentence structure that irks us, a focus on social action, authorship, and student as expert has helped to improve the final product of the senior investigative paper. We grade and focus on improvement of the paper from the first to last draft. It is possible the final draft will have grammatical and sentence structure errors, but this practice does mean that the content and evaluation/analysis has greatly improved over the course of the paper.

Within the interdisciplinary studies program, there is the constant reminder to students that we are engaging in a process that can and will continually change as they encounter new information. (Students are often told to be comfortable being uncomfortable because this is a new process in which they are engaging.). Students in our department move through two senior capstone classes. In the first, students conduct the research, and in the second, they begin writing. (Adjustments have been made for the online classes.) The stress of graduation relying on a research paper is not often experienced until graduate school, and the reframing of this requirement to a process that focuses

on improvement is key to help address some of the stress most students encounter with such a large project. The senior investigative paper at Johnson C. Smith University does not require primary research, although many papers, especially in STEM fields, present such research. As such, it is envisioned more as a student capstone project of significant depth and length to represent critical disciplinary thinking and writing skills within the students' major/discipline.

## **Seminar Practices and the Messiness of Interdisciplinary Research**

Interdisciplinary Studies students are required to complete a Junior Seminar course structured around research methods, which is unique in that it requires students to know how to do research in multiple disciplines. Students learn how to bridge the gap between their chosen disciplines, make connections, and integrate insights from their research. The focus of the class is the research process. We often tell students that we are taking what they were taught previously (prior to reaching college) and flipping the process. Students have become accustomed to writing and researching as they go. They find sources to support their claims and often create a hodgepodge of sources that do not fit together, contradict each other, and do not develop their research question. Students often select a topic, formulate a thesis statement, and start the writing process.

The focus in the Junior Seminar course is to break down the research process and focus on content and context. Lectures range from constructing a proper research question with an interdisciplinary focus, ensuring two or more disciplines have peer-reviewed research on the problem, and ensuring that the question or issue is complex (e.g., one discipline does not hold the answer to the problem). For the better part of the semester, students learn the step-by-step process of research, culminating with a final annotated bibliography project. (It should be noted that if the course is traditional, spanning 16 weeks, students do not start their senior paper projects; in our adult learner courses, which span eight weeks, they do start their senior paper research project due to the shortened time frame). With the shift in the focus for the eight-week Junior Seminar class, students are dissuaded from using non-academic sources, although lectures are provided on how to integrate such sources into their research. The key is to allow students to see the information from experts in the fields. Students often rely on popular sources, but the focus is on building academic research skills that can be utilized in a broader context once developed successfully. Once they have the academic research support needed, which is developed in the Junior Seminar class, when they enter their first Senior

Capstone course they can include popular sources. A similar approach is taken with the traditional first Senior Capstone course, in which students use popular sources after they have an appropriate number of peer-reviewed, academic sources to support their research question. (This number varies depending on the research question under study along with the scope and purpose of the project).

One practice that has helped students develop their research question is to identify the why behind their question. Students need to see value and application in their research. Typically, students are asked to share their research question and their 'why' behind the question during class discussion, which allows for immediate feedback. In an online setting, students share via a discussion board and the instructor provides direct feedback to the students and allows others to provide their input on the research question. The discussion board is a valuable component for the students as they can see from their peers that their question has value to others. As interdisciplinary studies instructors, we focus on the "so what" question, making sure students show the value of studying the topic selected. Topics range from Ban the Box to maternal health gaps and healthcare disparities, etc. While students at an HBCU see these topics as valuable, it is important for them to convey the larger context of the problem (e.g., why someone outside of the community should care about this issue). Students, especially interdisciplinary studies students, are not given topics to research but forced to find an issue about which they are passionate and/or one that has directly impacted them. This approach to topic selection is where the focus of student authorship and student-as-expert comes into practice: the focus is not necessarily on new contributions to a research area, but on students being able to develop a voice and contribute to a question from their unique perspective and lived experience. Once a research question has been developed, often noted that it is a working research question as it will shift and develop as they start their research process, students next focus on context (e.g., why this question, why now, and how was this issue framed previously?).

Students are often fearful of being accused of plagiarism or are afraid of research because so much emphasis is placed on citation formats and technical elements. What has helped to improve student work and alleviate the stress and worry of some of the technical aspects is practice. We are not encouraging a failure to cite work but rather a focus on constant coaching to improve proper citation and formatting. Students know when they have purposely plagiarized but the concern comes when they are unsure if they have properly cited a source. The focus on coaching against unintended plagiarism helps students avoid the fear of possibly failing and focus on learning proper procedures and practices.

We have found that practice does make perfect when it comes to reading sources for content and context, key focuses for interdisciplinary work. As a point of practice, a weekly “research” assignment was created for the Junior Seminar class. Students are assigned the news podcast NPR Up First, where three news stories are presented daily to listeners; each podcast ranges from 13 to 18 minutes. Students have to listen to one day of the podcast and select one story from that day, and they are then asked to select two news stories to compare to the podcast story. Why have them engage with popular sources when they are not allowed to use them in their research? The answer is two-fold: 1. Students are comfortable with these sources as they often engage with them daily; using sources with which they are comfortable makes it easier for them to practice and develop skills like formatting proper citations, writing summaries (annotations), comparing sources, etc. 2. Students learn to vet and analyze popular sources before using them in their academic papers. Upon reflection at the end of the term, students realize the skills they developed from this weekly assignment are easily utilized on the formal academic writing assignments, which was the ultimate goal of the assignment. Receiving feedback and even point deductions on low stakes assignments allows students to receive and process the feedback; thus, when the higher stakes assignments are in front of them, they soon realize they have been doing this work all semester, just with different formats. Students exit the course confident they have developed skills that will help them successfully complete a formal academic paper. The fear of unintended plagiarism is diminished, but not alleviated, because that fear has been instilled in them from their freshman year, and thus, students start to engage with sources on a deeper level and focus on content engagement with the source.

This assignment is designed to meet students on their level, to utilize sources and daily practices with which they are comfortable to develop and enhance their research skills. What should also be noted is that this process also allows students to focus on topics in which they are interested and find value, allowing them to start to develop their voice as an expert. We don't place value on the source in this assignment but the skills that can be developed. Students are also allowed to decide what story interests them and what they wish to learn about when comparing how the stories are presented. They analyze the stories in terms of target audience, the tone of the article, and its purpose, and they compare the stories, noting differences and similarities in how the information is presented. The assignment allows them to analyze the information in terms of content and context. Shifting the focus away from using only academic sources to developing a key academic skill allows students to also build confidence in their work. There has been a vast improvement in students' work due to the

inclusion of this research-based assignment in the areas of evaluating the information of the source, understanding the intended audience, the purpose of the source, and placing the information into the context of the problem or social issue. All of these components are what we ask students to do during their research and during the building of their annotated bibliography for the senior paper project proposal (a high impact project). The value of these smaller, low stakes assignments can be seen when students transition into more rigorous academic assignments.

## High Impact Projects: The Importance of Faculty and Student Engagement

High impact projects, like the senior paper, allow first-generation and underserved students the ability to engage in academic settings that mimic learning communities. The focus of adding a discussion piece to the core interdisciplinary studies classes is to promote those learning communities to show students that their words and thoughts have value. Creating a space to show their research is important and allows them to gain confidence in their work and to believe that what they are observing and writing about has a greater impact beyond their personal life. The discussion allows a sense of academic belonging that often evades first-generation college students.

While it is common for first-generation college students to avoid engaging with faculty beyond the classroom setting, it is important to bridge that gap and create a space for discussion and the creation of ideas (what we later identify as social capital). Specifically for the senior paper courses, faculty hold individual conferences with students to discuss their research and allow the student and faculty member to get to know each other personally. This helps the faculty to coach the student in their writing and show them where they have great ideas, points, claims, and research and what needs to be improved upon. Students are often afraid of feedback, but these conferences allow faculty to walk the students through their work and address contextual concerns but also allows the faculty to give them direct praise on their hard work. During non-COVID times, the traditional Senior Capstone classes were held to allow students to have a space to complete their writing, ask for immediate feedback and direction, and to engage with other students (whom they often turn to for academic support and information). Specifically at Johnson C. Smith University, it is important for students to connect with their peers but also to connect with their advisors and major faculty. Oftentimes, students refuse to let each other fail and thus hold each other accountable to ensure due dates are met and goals are obtained.

For example, starting in the 2017-2018 academic year, the traditional, 16-week courses were broken into smaller sections. Each group reported to class on a designated day (the course often ran on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule thus students would be in one of two groups: Monday or Wednesday. Fridays served as an open class time to meet with the professor directly, the classroom space remained open for those who needed the extra time to work on their projects). From those groups a natural leader stood out and took it upon themselves to email classmates, text them, read over their papers to provide feedback, and to remind them about due dates. These were not assigned leaders but strong students in the course that refused to let anyone fail. They often encouraged others to meet with their faculty mentors and the major professor during trying times or when they encountered a problem within their work. Prior to 2017, students in the senior paper courses were only required to meet with the leading faculty member of the course and their readers (a faculty member from each of their discipline/concentration areas). While this forced students to communicate with faculty, the dynamic was very different, and students did not work together or create their social capital within their peer groups.

As the classroom practices described above suggest, because interdisciplinary studies presents unique challenges for students in meshing two disciplines in one project without direct models or guidelines for how to do so, the messiness of interdisciplinary research requires even more emphasis on peer support and feedback, engaged learning communities, and student interaction with each other. By “messiness,” we are in part relying on formulations of interdisciplinary research as fruitfully and necessarily “messy.” As Donaldson, Ward, & Bradley (2010) suggest, we can think of two competing views within interdisciplinary research:

Much interdisciplinary research seems to proceed from the assumption that synthesis is desirable, that a new integrated perspective can be found on a singular object, if only the right object can be identified. This chimes with the epistemological view of objects. We have sided more with the ontological view, which holds that the objects of interdisciplinary research are, almost by definition, anything but singular. If they appear messy it is because they are multiply determined and partially connected.

This notion of the messiness of interdisciplinary research matches well with our view of the messy incommensurability at the heart of our students’ writing processes: they are quite often writing from a marginalized position, with a marginalized voice, attempting to make arguments that are deemed adequate in terms of Edited American English and traditional academic conventions, while

simultaneously maintaining and developing their own unique voices that they often view as in conflict with those conventions.

## Opening Spaces in a Conflicted Field

Returning to Cogie's (2011) insights regarding agency and power in the classroom, a crucial conflict she identifies regards the contested nature of the university writing center, and it seems useful to extend her argument to the writing classroom more generally. Cogie draws on Judith Butler's theory of agency:

Most helpful in Butler's (1997) theory of agency for understanding our project is her suggestion that awkwardness and imperfection in expressions of power can help the person who owns the power reach a purpose behind it. When our own power is disrupted, the possibility exists for us to gain agency which "exceeds the power which [the agency] is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the extent that the latter diverge from the former, agency is the assumption of a purpose unintended by power. (p. 230-231)

Cogie asks us to consider this "awkwardness" in the racial context of the students of color navigating the production of academic discourse in the writing classroom as an opportunity rather than a barrier. This opportunity affords an instructor the ability to isolate, consider, and in many ways, "shed one's privilege" (p. 231).

For our purposes, this opening of the space of the senior seminar classroom has allowed us to reframe the Senior Investigative Paper as more of an opportunity for exploration and engagement with social issues and problems that are intensely relevant and important to our students. Rather than focusing on the senior paper writing process as an attempt to force students to adhere to and master a set of writing conventions and modes, including proficient use of Edited American English, we have instead opted for what Cogie, following Tagg (2003), calls a "hot cognitive economy" (Cogie, p. 231) in the classroom. The classroom spaces embrace and welcome conflict, challenge instructors as well as students to recognize the racial dynamics and imbalances of power involved and ask instructors to "dare to engage students as players, allowing them to learn through participation in the process of making knowledge" (p. 231).

One example illustrates the benefits of widening the field to allow students to act more as experts. One recent interdisciplinary studies student in the online, non-traditional program expressed a desire to research the effects of excessive reliance on solitary confinement within the prison system

and the negative effects on mental health for prisoners during and after incarceration. As one of her areas of focus within interdisciplinary studies was criminology, this seemed a good fit. As the student gathered research materials for the paper, it became clear that she wanted to do more than discuss it in an abstract, policy-oriented way. During a conference with the student, she described how her husband had been incarcerated and subjected to significant time in solitary confinement. She had a strong desire to make the paper more personal and bring her husband's voice into the project.

Given more time and resources, we might have been able to help the student develop a way to interview her husband and others about their experiences with solitary confinement and its effects. But given the tight, eight-week time frame for online students to complete the writing of the paper, this course of action was impractical. Nonetheless, the student was encouraged to find ways that were comfortable and fit into the tight timeline to incorporate her family story. More important than focusing on the standard conventions of how to include such personal perspectives appropriately was the importance of opening the space of the research paper to allow her to include, in her own way, her family story.

Another example, from a traditional student in a 16-week class, involved a student wanting to explore maternal health disparities, especially Black maternal health disparities. Through the research process, the student was able to gather great peer-reviewed sources to support the popular source news stories about the continued disparities encountered by Black women. When the student entered the second class, the writing focused class, her story took over and not her research. Never wanting to stifle her voice, it became even more important to navigate her story and weave in the research to support her experiences and generalized claims. What she experienced was identified in the research, and it was our job as her mentors to show where the connections could be made to provide the best possible research paper. While the end result was not a perfectly edited paper, the final draft was a great example of a balanced paper highlighting the student as expert as well as disciplinary expert support.

Students' lived experiences, we argue, should never be ignored or discouraged from appearing in their papers. To further exemplify this, a student in the Spring 2022 term has focused their paper on addiction and homelessness, both experiences they have encountered in their life. The academic research shows their lived experiences are not uncommon and they can thus develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social institutions they have encountered and what can be done to solve the problem under exploration. When students see the application of the research to their

own experience or what they are currently living, they develop a deeper understanding of the world around them. Within the research this particular student found that the unhoused are classified into four categories and was able to explore possible resources to prevent or help those whom they encountered who were unhoused. We have had past students explore colorism and the interconnection of media representations of Black and brown women. Through their exploration of their experiences and observations were academically verified, they learned the deep and lengthy history behind these representations, allowing them to develop a detailed understanding of why shifts in media representations have occurred and the social implications of these representations.

We cannot forgo the academic practices like proper citation, editing, revising, and quality, but we can shift how we define certain academic practices (specifically quality). If the old saying “practice makes perfect” is true, a focal point should be to get students to engage in academic writing practices that help them meet the requirements of Edited American English and proper citation practices while still providing opportunities for transgressions and tangents that open up the contested writing space. Re-envisioning the senior capstone course and Senior Investigative Paper as less a credentialing of the student’s ability to conform to academic conventions and more as a final opportunity (for many) in the academic context to develop their own distinct voice and use that voice to explore and advocate around issues of great personal relevance. As Poe (2022) notes, “I am not interested in making divisions between ‘appropriate’ ways of writing at work versus at home” (p. 177). Focusing on feedback practices to allow students to develop a voice and own their expertise is key to shifting our perspective of the purpose of the senior investigative paper. Poe points to a key struggle within writing at many institutions, that of language, which will be touched on later. The outstanding question is how do we help students develop their authorial voice?

## **Developing Academic Social Capital**

First-generation college students have a difficult time entering academic settings for many reasons, which is not to say that all struggle, but many do. Why is this the case? Soria and Stebleton (2012) claim this is “because first-generation students do not possess the same levels of social capital as their non-first-generation peers, they are likely to face more challenges in navigating the university and in becoming fully engaged in their academic pursuits” (p. 673). These students enter into an unknown academic setting with no social capital, no previous knowledge or helpful advice on how to navigate this new world. First-generation college students at HBCUs have added issues and critiques

they must navigate: the stereotype that an HBCU education is subpar compared to their white counterpart institutions (PWIs). The power of one's social capital cannot be ignored: "Social capital-privileged knowledge, resources, and information attained through social networks-is important within higher education because it can be used to make beneficial decisions related to choosing colleges and what kinds of academic and social choices to make while enrolled in college (Pascarella et al. 2004)" (Soria and Stebleton, 2012, p. 675). First generation college students often do not possess these privileges, sources of support, or decision-making guidance. In many cases the student runs the risk of being shunned by family, friends, and social circles.

Soria and Stebleton (2012) also note, "Several indicators point to the potential for first-generation students to experience problematic transitions to higher education; for example, compared with their peers, first-generation students tend to come from families with lower socioeconomic status, have lower educational aspirations, and lower levels of engagement in high school (Terenzini et al. 1996)" (p. 674). The struggles that are often encountered by students include the need to balance a full academic class load with part-time (and sometimes full-time) work. The balance is difficult to find for many first-generation college students; these challenges are all too common across the academic setting, regardless of the locale. At Johnson C. Smith it is not uncommon for students to enter with lower SAT scores or low high-school GPAs. While this can be seen as a detriment, knowing where a student enters into the university aids professors in helping them reach their potential. This is not uncommon for first-generation college students as a whole as indicated by Soria and Stebleton (2012): "first-generation students also tend to have lower Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and lower high school grade point averages (Riehl 1994) and less support from their families in regard to college attendance (Billson and Terry 1982; Terenzini et al., 1996; York-Anderson and Bowman 1991)" (p. 674). Lack of support and social capital can be even more difficult when you add in racial issues and social expectations that HBCU students encounter.

What do students do when they enter into an institution with little to no social capital? They turn to their peers for support and guidance. And while they should turn to their instructors for support, Engle and Tinto (2008) note that "research has shown that low-income and first-generation students are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college, such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extra-curricular activities, and using support services" (p. 3). This pattern indicates the value of faculty-led efforts in the classroom and writing center to bridge the gap and aid students in developing comfort

with what is available to them. We argue that one way to do this is by placing value in students as experts, specifically in their own experiences, and aiding them in connecting to discipline experts. Students who are only critiqued, never praised, and not shown the value in their voice will continue to lack social capital that will help them thrive. Soria and Stebleton continue to note that “at these larger institutions, students often rely on peer enclaves to access academic-related information rather than seek out faculty or other institutional agents; as a consequence of lacking social capital at a large institution, first-generation students may lose opportunities to develop supportive mentoring relationships with faculty, and they may become less engaged in their overall academic pursuits” (p. 675). This is also true for smaller institutions as students are often fearful of sitting in front of their instructors to be critiqued and judged. The question that remains is how do we help first-generation college students build social capital and address inequalities they have encountered through their life, both socially and academically?

One practice we have used to build students’ confidence in their writing and in the classroom is to stress that they are the experts of their own experiences. It is the instructor’s role to show them how to meld their expertise with those in the disciplines. What traditionally white institutions often do or threaten to do is silence the student as expert and devalue their expertise in their experiences. This can be said of any student, regardless of race, but it is particularly detrimental to Black and brown students. What results is a message of devaluing Black and brown stories, especially when framed from the idea that the student is the expert. It is commonly thought that PWIs (primarily white institutions) lead the way in research and HBCUs are often lacking in support and expertise. “This constant comparison of HBCUs to traditionally white institutions, the latter representing the superior model, reinforces stereotypes of inadequacy in the former” (Mitchell and Randolph, p. 22). What shouldn’t be ignored is that HBCUs can lead the way in valuing students as experts, offering something that PWIs do not, the support of their voices being heard and stories being told. HBCUs hold socially active students because of their experiences: “for HBCUs, social justice has always meant social activism, and it requires our moving our gaze beyond those who uphold our comfortable narratives because as Chimamanda Adichie (2009) has told us, we must challenge the notion of a single narrative” (Mitchell and Randolph, p. 23). It is important for professors to acknowledge the student’s narrative but also those within the disciplines that address their experiences or social issues they are addressing in their writing. Mitchell and Randolph (2019) describe one author’s experience with being charged by their dean with an exploration of writing centers at PWIs to

determine “best practices,” even though it seemed the new dean had little direct knowledge of the existing practices: “However, for me, her request for this ‘fact-finding mission’ was nevertheless dubiously and tangentially linked to certain sentiments about the worth and value of HBCUs” (Mitchell and Randolph, p. 29). Such assumptions—that HBCUs are innately inferior to PWIs and can automatically gain from emulating pedagogical and tutoring practices used by the latter, only further promotes the idea that HBCU education is inferior and thus HBCUs must learn from their superior PWI counterparts to be effective in higher education. This message of inferiority spreads to students who attend HBCUs and first-generation college students become less confident in the skills they are developing and their overall education.

Even at an HBCU, we have often encountered pressure and complaints from faculty across the campus that, to us, run counter to the endeavor of student writing. These complaints are that we are not focusing enough on mechanics and formatting, that we are not spending enough time doing basic grammar instruction, and that we are not worried enough about whether the final senior papers will represent an embarrassment to our institution if they fail to adhere to Edited American English. Mitchell and Randolph (2019) describe a scenario in “A Page from Our Book: Social Justice Lessons from the HBCU Writing Center,” in which a student is brought to an HBCU writing center:

As we worked together, he hesitantly acknowledged his tendency to write how he spoke, offering this as if he were at confessional sharing a sin. But, instead of becoming excited about the essay’s growing clarity, Student J gradually lost his initial enthusiasm. He became increasingly irritable when I queried him about his linguistic choices. He protested that delaying his point to the end of his sentence or the end of a paragraph was a deliberate writing choice of which he was proud. And he objected to what he called ‘revising his voice out of his essay.’ (p.27)

Mitchell goes on to note that she was engaging the student in a kind of “linguistic push-pull” experienced by so many African American students. The value and importance of a student’s voice cannot be lost in academic writing. Having worked with students on major projects, we often note that there is a fine line between academic writing and everyday speech, and this fine line is what we will work on, but we should always hear the student’s voice in their writing. Valuing students as experts of their own experiences allows the professors to make connections but to also aid in shifting them to academic, Edited American English writing.

Where is the value in revising students’ voices out of their essay? With voices being stifled from the onset of their academic career, when students (especially those who attend HBCUs) must relearn

the value of their voice and the power of their voice? Many first-generation college students struggle with finding their academic voice while remaining true to their family and social history. Mitchell continues to note the struggles she encountered with helping a student, only meeting them upon being able to make a linguistic connection. Students, particularly at HBCUs and those who are first generation students, struggle to connect to their writing, professor expectations, and social expectations. Students often encounter what Mitchell points out that her student encountered: “In essence, he was toiling with his love for what he wrote alongside the institutionalized disdain for how he writes. This exchange is not unique to me and my HBCU: many others notice this in their writing centers and classrooms” (Mitchell and Randolph, p. 28). Mitchell references Coughlin, et al. (2012), invoking the notion of writing centers at HBCUs as third spaces: “third space in a writing center context as ‘the location or ideology that is negotiated and/or created when different identities or spaces come into discussion with one another (p. 4), we can see how HBCU writing centers are always in the process of becoming through co-creation via shared cultural values” (Mitchell and Randolph, p. 28). What we argue is that this third space must be included and utilized in any classroom setting to enhance student writing and confidence.

## **The Fight Over Language**

Again, we question if we advise a student’s voices out of their paper, what message does this send to them? Depending on the feedback and the way the criticism is structured, this can be a very damaging message. This is especially true when we discuss first-generation students but also first-generation Black and brown students who have been told most of their life they need to speak a specific way (in school, to elders, and when in a professional setting). In “Should Writers Use They Own Language,” Vershawn Ashanti Young explores the power structure that surrounds language. As Young notes, “It be the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language. Like the way some view, say, Black English when used in school or at work. Black English don’t make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views about other people usin they own language” (p. 62). What value is there in telling a student to not write in the dialect that they are used to, where they can freely express and relay their experiences in their own words and on their own terms? If Standard English is required or encouraged, should we not start with allowing students to write in the context they feel the most comfortable, allowing their voices and stories to be heard before we focus on sentence syntax and structure? Language is important for students, especially first-generation college students, and

allowing them to initially write in their dialect allows them to maintain some form of autonomy over their story.

Young discusses the concept of “stereotype threat” which is at the heart of trying to eliminate a student’s dialect or way of speaking from a paper: “This term applies when someone is forced in the face of racial perceptions to keep the most expressive parts of her language out of formal communication, whether writing or speaking, like when say, a black person is asked to keep her dialect out of a school paper” (p. 65). This is the direct experience that Mitchell notes in her student example, showing that this stereotype threat impacts students in a variety of ways. Stereotype threat shows itself in many ways during the research and writing process and forces students to question their ability, but what is the value in this practice? Students can and do internalize this stereotype, and when combined with the lack of social capital and support they experience, they are discouraged before they even start writing.

When addressing lack of social capital, combined with the fight over language, we can look at it from an inequality or rather inequity point. Poe notes that she focuses on the use of the term inequity: “First, I use the term *inequity* rather than *inequality*. The word inequality suggests an imagined level playing field” (p. 164) and it is important, especially for this article, to note that we are not dealing with an imagined level playing field but rather lack of access. Lack of access exists for our students at JCSU at many points but also the expectation to write and speak in Standard English when a student struggles to navigate between two worlds is extremely detrimental to their academic progress, specifically in the realm of critical and analytical thinking. While students do not enter on a level playing field, we can start to address the inequity conversation by allowing them to be experts of their experiences. Poe continues, noting that “from nomenclature changes to curricular revisions, current events are leading to important shifts in how higher education researchers, teachers, and administrators think and talk about inequity. Academic writing, influenced by calls for linguistic justice and equity-based assessment, is certainly implicated in these shifts” (p. 179). While our curriculum is not changing, how we approach student outcomes is, as well as how we assess not only the final product but the process of research and writing.

Why do we approach writing from the standpoint that there is a set of concrete rules we must apply to every paper, which is difficult to hammer home to students, especially interdisciplinary studies students, when they encounter a variety of disciplines? Young notes, “standard language ideology is the belief that there is one set of dominant language rules that stem from a single

dominant discourse (like standard English) that all writers and speakers of English must conform to in order to communicate effectively” (p. 62). Knowing that most do not adhere to these rules all of the time in their personal and professional life, why would we hold students to this expectation? We find it more valuable to place effort in content development, which naturally leads to better writing. A common practice utilized is noting where a student does a great job of telling their story or presenting the social issues and then guiding them to where they need the peer-reviewed support (e.g., they aren’t wrong in their observation and here is the already-vetted peer-reviewed source to show it).

Young calls for code meshing: “Code meshing what we all do whenever we communicate—writin, speakin, whateva. Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts” (p. 67). If we value students as experts of their own experiences and we place value in their stories and passion, code meshing is the easiest way to show our support. Students are in a constant battle to utilize proper Standard English while finding or maintaining their voice in their writing, building social capital, and navigating an unfamiliar space. What is the problem with allowing code meshing in their papers to give them comfort and autonomy in their work as well as giving them a chance to be seen? The answer is simple: there is none. There is nothing wrong with allowing students to write what they know, how they know, and to focus on bridging the gap with academic writing to support their arguments. It is also difficult to argue against code meshing when there is a growing practice of using popular sources and examples (e.g., television shows, songs, etc.) as points of analysis in classes across the academic landscape. If we are allowing the sources and examples to be studied in academia that utilize the dialect and language practices the students adhere to in their daily lives, how can we require only Edited American English in work produced? This sends yet another confusing message to the student. If they are allowed to mimic in the work they produce that is often under study, this can help to continue to build confidence in their work and critical thinking abilities. Confident students produce better work and build better social capital as they are able to connect with other students and faculty because they feel seen by their peers and professors.

Even at an HBCU, where the vast majority of our students are African American and products of the systems of inequity that Poe (2022) describes, there are in many ways *more* pressures—from other faculty, from the administration, from parents, and alumni—to assure that our students are able to master Standard Academic Writing. These pressures come as means of demonstrating the

value of such institutions in countering the results of systemic inequity, but also (somewhat ironically) as a way of signaling the often-challenged legitimacy of such historically Black institutions of higher education. Our goal here has been to discuss various options that we have tried to open up, both for our students' approaches to academic writing and our own biases and practices in how to instruct and assess.

## Endnotes

1. The current JCSU catalog addresses this requirement: "Senior Investigative Paper is required of every student for graduation. Faculty members from a student's major serve as advisors in its preparation. The details of scheduling and exact requirements vary from Department to Department and, as such, the paper may take various forms, including but not limited to papers, portfolios, and projects. Typically, students begin topic formulation, research design, preliminary research, and literature searches in their junior year. Students receive detailed information on the paper's requirements in their Major from their advisors and other faculty members" (Johnson C. Smith University, 2021, p. 90).
2. We use this term intentionally to invoke Cogie's (2011) call for teachers to maintain an open-endedness in instructions for academic writing that "dare[s] to engage students as players, allowing them to learn through participation in the process of making knowledge" (p. 231). We will return to this idea in the following sections.

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