

Choices About Voices

Can you write like you talk like you sing like you drum like you dance your life?

Charlie Keil in "Culture, Music & Collaborative Learning" (Appendix A.)

I am adding this short essay from Composition Studies (where it benefited from an introduction by John Trimbur and commentary by Peter Elbow) because, even though it was originally intended for an African-American college student, any adult reading this might see the implications for encouraging children to develop and maintain at least three styles of written communication as extensions of their "primary communication" and grooving.

This essay could have a lot of different titles. I want to persuade one college student in particular to take three steps: 1) write poetry regularly; 2) develop a prose style for and from her home culture, a prose style of solidarity; 3) develop a crisp, professional, all-purpose "King's English." But many students and human beings generally could use this "triple competence," a "both/and" approach to communication in writing, starting with: 1) "who I am" as a poet; 2) "who we are" socially; and 3) "who I could become" in the corporation-controlled, university-assisted, bureaucratically-manipulated world as it has been recently and is today. With these three foundation competencies established a person can move confidently to fluency in more than one language, knowing some dialects of each language, having a variety of solidarity prose styles and poet's skills as strategies for situations. This is a good goal for many individuals and probably good for the world historical process too.

I'm looking at two 'book reports' that have some poetry in them, but it is hidden, smothered; ideas behind the sentences are poetic, playful, hinting at participatory consciousness (Keil and Feld 1994) but these impulses are screened from view. The book reports have some African-American dialect in them but it is scattered, NOT free-wheeling, flowing, in your face, NOT a celebration of another way of being and speaking both in the world and on the page. Rather, the writing comes across as long, unpunctuated sentences filled with annoying 'grammar mistakes' suspended somewhere between the 'black world' and the 'white world.' It is NOT poetry. It is NOT sassy black prose. It is NOT crisp, clear, easy to read 'King's English.' And this prof wants one of these three voices, or another compelling voice, to appear on the page representing a person I know to be very intelligent, very quick, very eager to make a difference in the world.

I call the third voice "King's English" because it has authority and centuries of text usage, dictionaries, thesaurus compilations, libraries full of books, behind it. To get a good job, rise up the ladder, be effective in today's world you need to have command of this language. Go to the composition course, go to the writing lab, read Ernest Hemingway, learn to write short sentences in topic-sentenced paragraphs, practice noun verb agreement, avoid the passive voice constructions, learn the rules of punctuation and

any other rules that an efficient user of the King's English can tell you have been broken over and over again in your present ineffective prose style. Too often, what I'm reading is the writer's imagined approximation of what the King's English might sound like! Get it right and make it real.

Poetry. Demystify it. Practice it a few times a day. Make metaphors in the moment. Find the poems inside the prose you have written. Bring it out. Try different line schemes. Speak into a tape recorder and transcribe it. Speak or scream or whisper it just the way you want it. Try to get the sound and feeling of it on to the page. The King's English is the King's. There are rules. Learn them and follow them. Poetry is yours. No rules. Whatever you say and put on the page is what it is. Get a copy of *The Rattlebag* and rattle with the rest of us.

The intermediate prose, #2 above, is more of a puzzle, a negotiation, saying it the way the people closest to you would like to hear it. Maybe they would like to hear you able to jump back and forth from poetry to the King's English without missing a beat. Maybe they would like to hear or see you show mastery of the King's English in order to deliberately mess with it, subvert it, play with it. Maybe they would like to hear it straight from the heart, but elegant. It is not easy to give advice because for each person the negotiation is going to be different every day. Many people don't see the need for this language. No one can tell you how to do it. But I think it is very important to solve this puzzle, to find a new middle ground between your poetry and your official prose, to join a community that is not the King's and to communicate with that community in a way that is more reasonable than poetry, more passionate than the King's English can ever be, more committed to shared sociability and shared vision. Who are you "with" in this world? Who is your extended family? What does your circle of friends want to hear that bears witness to your friendship? There are times when you can answer these questions with a poem. There are times when statements in the King's English can and must represent this community of yours to the wider world. But there are also times, if a diversity of cultures and communities is to be sustained on this planet, when you need to write for each other in a language that is being invented from day to day in order to develop this sense of belonging to a community. I believe that developing and clarifying this solidarity prose, this language of the in-group, may be necessary to developing your voice as a poet, and may be necessary for improving the very specific precision and tone of your King's English as well. Conversely, if you grow as a poet and master the King's English, this prose of your people may emerge over a lifetime and become your most effective channel of communication.

Pat Campbell:

For children finding their own voices in poetry and music, it is useful to have heard the voices of others. We do well to fill their ears with the finest of a diversity of voices: Maya Angelou, Basho, Emily Dickenson, T. S. Elliot, Seamus Heaney, Carl Sandburg, Shel Silverstein, Edith Sitwell, Walt Whitman. Share the verses of blues balladeers and singer-songwriters, too: Bob Dylan, Victor Jara, Robert Johnson, Willy Nelson, Dolly Parton, Sylvio Rodriguez, Buffy St. Marie, Howlin' Wolf.

* For help on the use of poetry in the classroom, see
Fletcher, Ralph, 2001. How to Write Poetry (Scholastic Guides). New York:
Scholastic.
Janeczko, Paul, 1999. Favorite Poetry Lessons (Grades 4-8). New York:
Scholastic/Teaching Resources.
Janecsco, Paul, 2000. Teaching 10 Fabulous Forms of Poetry. New York:
Scholastic/Teaching Resources.
Koch, Kenneth and Ron Padgett, 2000. Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching
Children to Write Poetry. New York: Perennial.
Sweeney, Jacqueline, 2000. Fun 15- Minute Poetry-Writing Activities (Grades 2-
4). New York: Scholastic Professional Books.
Wade, Barrie, 1996. A Guide to Children's Poetry for Teachers and Librarians.
Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing.