



Identity and Inclusiveness in the Composition Classroom

Andrea Lunsford, Stanford University

Shifting the way educators think about teaching writing and bringing inclusivity into the composition classroom can greatly alter the way students connect to their own identity. It can help them find themselves, and appreciate their differences.

Introduction

The relationship between writing and identity is extremely significant. And, the conversation around writing and identity can't happen without considering inclusion.

As students sharpen their writing skills throughout their educational careers, lessons tend to work against identity and inclusiveness. Students see examples and are taught ways to write that diminish these elements, replacing one's own voice with a standardized version of expression.

This is much to the student's detriment. Our writing helps build our identity, and if we can't write our true selves, how can we become our most authentic selves?

Shifting the way educators think about teaching writing, bringing inclusivity into the composition classroom can greatly alter the way students connect to their own identity. It can help them find themselves, and appreciate their differences.



What's your earliest memory of writing?

A person's connection to the written word often starts very early. When asked what their earliest memory or writing is, many respond with the experience of writing their own name. This is intimately connected to identity. Before you understand your likes and dislikes, your cultural background, your ethnicity, your sexual orientation, you know your name.

Writing your name is also the first step in telling your own story. It's like the introduction. It also proves there's an intricate relationship between writing and identity.

Sadly, the second most common example of a person's first memory of writing involves being chastised in some way. Maybe they mistakenly wrote their 'e's' backward. Maybe they continually misspelled a word. Maybe they wrote as they spoke, incorporating slang they used every day.

This illustrates the way writing can disconnect a person from their identity. There's no reason a student must be corrected if they're writing as they speak, incorporating their own slang or accent into an assignment.

Writing is a force that allows people to feel included and excluded, even when writing their own story.



The ties between language and writing

As we learn to write, we often don't realize we're not like everyone else until we leave our home base, meaning there's not an automatic exclusion from being considered a "good" writer. However, once you leave your familiar environment, that can quickly change.

Look at it from the perspective of accents. If you grow up in the South, with an accent holding all those nuances, and move to New York, how will you be perceived? Will people judge you as being unintelligent because of how you speak? What if that's also how you write?

Being corrected or having to battle assumptions can take its toll on an individual's identity and impact how a person sees themselves.

As educators, we can't prevent situations like these from happening outside the classroom, but we can work hard to create a space of inclusivity so they don't occur within.



Acknowledge that every student can write

Every student can write, and write well. As their talent grows, they build an identity unique to themselves—or they could if we rethink what it means to write well.

From a purely educational perspective, writing well used to mean learning the conventions of standardized English. However, the words “standardized” and “identity” don’t go together, and students can lose or feel obligated to repress a part of themselves when having to conform to these standards.

Standardized English works to empower and privilege some and disempower and silence others. This norm divides, but we don’t have to forgo it completely.

Students shouldn’t have to lose their home language to fit into a collegiate dialect. Classrooms should recognize the vitality of all languages and dialects in practice as well as theory. They’re all part of the history of language. And, while standardized English can create a foundation for comprehension, space should also be given to understanding the unique choices in rhetoric students make throughout college.



Broaden the presentation of language

For writing teachers, all of the issues around inclusivity are deeply complicated, yet so important to students and how they'll live their lives through language. Ways to merge the old with the new include finding more user-friendly examples of standardized English and using them alongside broader presentations of language use.

Specifically, within the classroom, consider:

- » Crafting inclusive guidelines for pronouns
- » Exploring language varieties and the intersection of language and identity that already exist
- » Practicing language awareness
- » Offering up inclusive and less antagonistic language choices
- » Putting language into cultural contexts and really looking at where language choices come from
- » Teaching students to read beyond what's on the page and look critically at what others are saying about the message/text

Teaching students how to read laterally is also an effective strategy. This encourages students to learn about the source as they're reading. Getting to know the author, and taking into consideration that person's identity, natural dialect, etc. can broaden their understanding of the piece, while emphasizing the value of adding their own flair to their writing.

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Draw a circle in the middle of a piece of paper or screen and put your name in it. Then add spokes pointing out from all around that circle and take some time to list words that identify you —

your relationship to family and others (sibling, mentor, friend)
your major interests (sports fan, runner, reader, gamer, vlogger)
your background (nationality, birthplace or hometown, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity)
personal attributes you claim or that others use to label you (good student, friendly, shy)

Some of the words you've written are bits of language that help you to construct your identity. Others may be words that other people have used to identify you, words you may or may not agree with or accept.

Identity is a familiar word, but it's worth pausing to think a bit about what it means. Most scholars would define identity as a web of relationships built up through language: how you understand your relationship to the world around you and use that understanding to imagine possibilities for your future. In more everyday terms, identity is the way you think about yourself and the characteristics that define you. And language is the major tool you have to name these characteristics.

Parts of your identity are stable — your age, for example, or your birthplace. But much of identity is constructed through social interactions with other people and with institutions and is thus flexible, subject to change and evolution. So identities can be multiple and shifting. They can also be imposed on you by other people or institutions that use language to label you in a way that is inappropriate, unfair, or unacceptable to you. In these ways, language works to construct who you are and who you can be.



Living life through language

The diversity within any given composition classroom today is vastly different than it once was. Students come from all over the world, speaking different languages and introducing unique identities into the mix. There's no more one-size-fits-all when it comes to language.

What these students do have in common is a desire to learn, grow and communicate with power and grace. They deserve to have their home languages and dialects sustained while working within the English language. They deserve to see examples of other writers that reflect inclusivity and they deserve to feel comfortable engaging in constructive criticism with their peers that isn't solely about "speaking proper English."

Writing classrooms are for creating our identities, which is why we must bring inclusion into all our teachings. We are, after all, writing ourselves.





Andrea Lunsford

Andrea A. Lunsford is the former Director of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) and the Louise Hewlett Nixon Professor of English Emerita at Stanford University along with a frequent faculty member at the Bread Loaf School of English. Professor Lunsford received her B.A. and M.A. at the University of Florida and completed her Ph.D in English at the Ohio State University in 1977. She has served as Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, as Chair of the Modern Language Association Division on Writing, and as a member of the MLA Executive Council.