

# What bilingual poets can do: Re-visioning English education for biliteracy

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## Abstract

This paper describes a bilingual-bidialectal poetry writing programme set up in a community library in the southeastern United States for multi-age learners. The authors explore the use of poetry as a vehicle for biliteracy development. The analysis draws on observations of the students' engagement with poetry both in terms of their writing and the teachers' responses. The paper discusses how poetry can inform a critical, multicultural approach to developing biliteracy in students of all ages and degrees of competence in written English. The authors theorise the role that poetry can play in creating positive learning environments for such students.

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## Keywords

*Poetry, biliteracy, library workshop (taller), collaborative work, programme setup in the community*

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Willingness to fail is the only way to succeed as a poet. As teachers and researchers of the English language, we are trained to be experts, consultants, knowers. However, in many English classrooms multiculturalism and multilingualism require that all English educators and students take social risks and direct attention to the complexities at stake: what Sadoff (2004) referred to as 'the worry' in life, language and poetry. In multicultural explorations and in poetry, the paradoxical key to success is that, as Stafford (1982, p. 450) reminds us, 'I must be willing to fail.'

This article grew out of our daily concerns as English educators, researchers, and poets working in a bilingual, after-school poetry programme for multi-age learners, which was held in our local library system (2005–2006) in the southeastern United States. We met once a month for two hours with poet-students ranging in age from four to 48, all of whose first language was Spanish. Throughout this project, we experienced many connections between writing poetry and communicating across linguistic and cultural differences: degrees of risk, vulnerability and failure, but also the potential for individual growth and the growth of trust or *confianza* (Vélez-Ibañez, 1996) within the group. In this writing community, we began to imagine ways in which the community *taller* (pronounced /ta/YER – Spanish for workshop), could provide a model for exploring creativity and multiculturalism in English education. Specifically, we explored poetry as a vehicle for language development, inviting our bilingual and bidialectal poet-students to draw upon all of their linguistic and cultural resources.

In this article, we debunk a key misconception about poetry, that it is an elite craft reserved for those who have both talent and Standard English proficiency. We argue that poetry is a powerful genre for developing students' love of language, especially students in the early stages of Standard English language acquisition. Building upon Hornberger's (1989, 2003) biliteracy framework, we analyse bilingual and bidialectal poetry by contemporary published poets as well as work by bilingual writers in our one-year poetry workshop.

Our analysis draws on observations of Latino students' engagement with poetry. It explores students' productions and teacher learning to illustrate how poetry has informed our critical, multicultural approach to literacy. We theorise the role English educators can play in cultivating an environment that values bilingual-bidialectal language contexts, media, content, and development (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester, 2000).

### **Biliteracy continua**

As our schools become increasingly diverse, *all* literacy teachers, policy makers and college professors teach and carry out research with communities speaking Standard English as a second or additional

language or dialect. Despite this reality, critical advocates such as Grinberg and Saavedra (2000) have noted that research and practice in bilingual and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) (EAL in the UK) education have too often been marginalised. Pre-service teachers may encounter only one multilingual credentialing course in a programme of study, and in-service teachers may encounter only one ESOL classroom in a high school. Research agendas that separate the study of English-language learners and multilingualism from content-area instruction perpetuate this false dichotomy.

Scholars have begun to bridge the divide and investigate the relationship between bilingual/ESOL education and instruction in English language arts generally. One of the pioneer scholars in this area is Dr. Nancy Hornberger, whose work toward joining the fields of bilingualism and literacy has made an enormous impact on both research and practice. Building upon Street's (1988) arguments against any false oral-literate divide, as well as Edelsky's (1986) and Hudelson's (1984) arguments against following too-linear progressions in second-language acquisition from speaking and listening to reading and writing, Hornberger (1989) and later Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester (2000) proposed a framework that encompassed the multifaceted and overlapping dimensions of biliteracy, including the process of language 'development' as it occurs in numerous 'contexts' through a variety of 'media' related to varying 'content' (see Figures 1 and 2).

Represented in Figure 1 are four dimensions of biliteracy with three continua, each 'embedded in a historical and contemporary matrix of intergroup power relations' (Hornberger, 2003, p. ix). The focus on continua rather than binaries acknowledges opposite ends (e.g. reception-production), while highlighting the transformative potential of working between the ends, resisting the implicit privileging of one end over the other (e.g. policies that solely promote and affirm written, monolingual, decontextualised, and standardised practices).

Figure 2 depicts the nested and intersecting nature of the continua summarised in Figure 1. The two models draw attention to the way English educators may or may not resist power structures that privilege Standard English monolingualism in classrooms where a diversity of linguistic practices can be silenced or given voice.

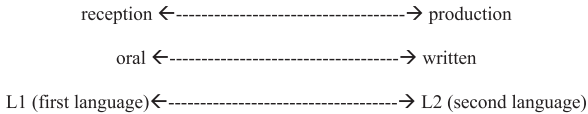
### **Study background**

Our study of poetry instruction with ESOL students began as a collaboration between Cahnmann-Taylor, a professor and poet in a College of Education, and Preston, a poet and scholar in an English Department – both with an interest in using poetry to promote biliteracy and bilingual-bidialectal verse. We conducted our teacher-research at an

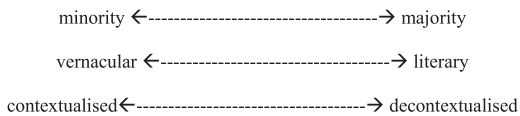
### 1. Context of biliteracy



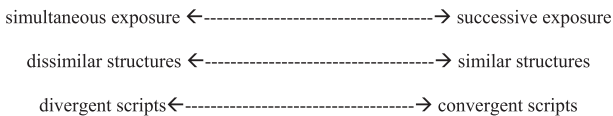
### 2. Development of biliteracy



### 3. Content of biliteracy



### 4. Media of biliteracy



*Figure 1: Four dimensions of the continua of biliteracy.*<sup>1</sup>

after school programme held in a bilingual Spanish–English branch of the local library system (*Biblioteca y Centro Educativo de la Comunidad*), located in a low-income, migrant-Hispanic and African American community. The library branch consists of a double-wide trailer containing a small computer lab, an office, and two rooms shelved with bilingual books, that serve alternately as play areas or classrooms. This bilingual branch, because its funding has been in continuous jeopardy and because the population it has served is in constant flux, challenged us to begin our creative collaborations in the ‘swampy lowlands’ (Schon, 1983) of an empirical study, full of ‘trial and error, intuition, and muddling through’ (p. 43).

The questions that guided our inquiry included: how is a *taller*/workshop setting distinct from a school-day classroom, and how can we capitalise on any advantages the *taller* setting offers? What kinds of bilingual-

<sup>1</sup>Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester (2000)

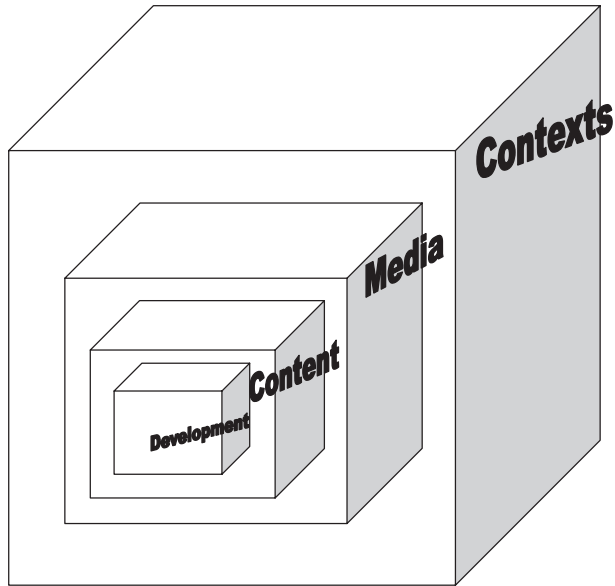


Figure 2: Nested relationships among the continua of biliteracy.<sup>2</sup>

bidialectal material do students produce in such a setting, and how do we respond in a way that honours and builds upon the potential found in rough drafts?

### Participants

Though we designed our workshop for middle school students, we quickly realised that after-school learning in this community involved the entire *familia*: middle school students were accompanied by younger siblings and cousins as well as parents, aunts, and uncles. Thirty-four participants, ranging in age from four to 48, attended our monthly workshops, most attending between two and five times over the year.

Though the bilingual library was created to provide Spanish materials to newcomer Latinos, we found most of our participants not only had good command of spoken English, but wrote their poetry almost entirely in English, in keeping with Edelsky's (1986) research showing that bilingual youths tend not to code-switch in written discourse. However, participants' written language revealed Spanish literacy patterns, lexical and syntactical structures found in the local African American community and content that revealed much about their bicultural experiences.

<sup>2</sup>Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester (2000)

## Method

In the after-school *taller* environment, we encountered students' work as teacher-researchers as well as writer-editors. As writer-editors, we identified exciting moments of language and content in students' poems, and noticed these moments often occurred where multiple dialects and/or languages met on the page. Having identified students' multilingual poetic resources, we asked questions about our own processes as teacher-researcher-creative-writers. Our empirical focus, therefore, was to analyse student work for what it could teach us about how to help students capitalise on their cultural and linguistic resources, even when a typical school setting might deem those resources non-standard and therefore inappropriate.

We transcribed each draft of students' work, tracking successive drafts and writing field notes of our conversations with students as they revised; each session we exchanged roles as instructor and note-taking researcher. Our programme culminated in a community reading from our *taller* anthology. We analyse features of students' productions in light of bilingual and bidialectal poetry written by accomplished multicultural writers. Our study asks how we as teachers can recognise the richness of American vernaculars in student work, and thereby help students access their existing resources to emulate prominent multilingual writers.

## Multilingualism is a poetic resource

While the impulse to compose a poem may spring from deep human need, a poem is completed through not only soul-searching, but also poetic craft, a skill set acquired through reading and study. Stevens (1951, p. 61) expressed this sense of craft when he called poetry 'the scholar's art'. However, technique alone does not make a poem; as poet James Wright (2005, p. 108) discovered in a letter to poet James Dickey, 'Competence alone is death.' Wright's comment makes a helpful mantra for teachers who feel pressure to do everything 'right' when they teach poetry: attentive engagement with language, questioning the 'how' and not only the 'what' of expression, helps L1 and L2 English speakers improve their grammar skills, and builds a habit of care with communication. As writers mature, this habit of care enables the acquisition of craft and technique, skills that move the poet's vision to the reader.

Educators can participate in this cultural and poetic attention by sharing with English-language learners how many poets draw upon multiple linguistic and cultural resources. For example, Chin (1994); Coleman (2003); Kim (2003); Divakaruni (2000) draw upon Hindi, Chinese, Korean, and American Black English linguistic and cultural structures, respectively, alongside more standard American English structures in their bilingual and

bidialectal work. Take for example this short poem from Espada (2003) that captures the tensions and humour inherent in US bilingual, bicultural identity, and the role teachers and other interpreters often play as representatives of institutions and student advocates:

MARIANO EXPLAINS YANQUI COLONIALISM TO JUDGE  
COLLINGS

Judge: Does the prisoner understand his rights?

Interpreter: ¿Entiende usted sus derechos?

Prisoner: ¡Pa 'l carajo!

Interpreter: Yes.

Martín Espada, "Mariano Explains Yanqui Colonialism to Judge Collings." From *Trumpets from the Islands of Their Eviction*, 1987, Bilingual Review Press, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

To appreciate this poem fully, it is helpful to know both Spanish and English codes and cultures. That the interpreter directly translates the judge's opening question is easy to understand. Less clear is the humorous turn when the prisoner responds '¡Pa 'l carajo!', which translates to 'He can go to hell!' One of the monolingual speaker's fears is that fluency in more than one code enables the bilingual to withhold insulting communication from the monolingual speaker (Urciuoli, 1997). English teachers are not immune to these fearful feelings, often assuming non-English language in the classroom signals students' misbehaviour and disrespect. An educator who welcomes bilingual resources and poetry in the classroom, however, is able to worry less about unkind chatter and more about maximising classroom contributions from students whose linguistic and cultural identities are valued.

Revisiting Espada's (2003) poem alongside the biliteracy continua helps us understand this framework. In terms of *development* and *context*, the humour stems from the prisoner's clear receptive, oral ability in English, and his rebellious oral response in his first language, Spanish. While Spanish and English *media* have much in common in terms of language structures (e.g. phonemes, morphemes and syntax) and scripts (e.g. writing systems including Roman alphabet, orthography, etc.), the interpreter's 'translation' of 'go to hell' simply as an affirmative 'yes' amplifies the poem's complications. The poem's title addresses the monolingual *contextualisation* of this face-to-face encounter that vivifies an individual's affront to generations of colonialism and unequal power relations. The characters in this short dialogue – the Judge, the Interpreter, and the Prisoner – embody hierarchies of power along bilingual-biliterate continua: the monolingual English-speaking authority, the Spanish-speaking insurgent, and the Interpreter who aims to communicate between these two

worlds. Ironically, Mariano's explanation of *Yanqui* colonialism is never realised because the interpreter refuses to translate the 'lesson' of rebellion.

Like the interpreter in the poem, English educators can either reveal or conceal students' critical, biliteracy resources. Unfortunately, due to widespread perception that standardised tests are the 'Judge', vernacular, minority content is seldom given voice and bilingual-bidialectal poetry rarely appears. Educators often mistakenly assume ESOL students are not capable of reading or writing poetry because they lack the standard, written, L2 proficiency required to understand form and meaning in English verse. Multilingual and multidialectal poetry in the English classroom can help an educator distinguish between correcting language *mistakes* that can impede understanding and silencing *varieties of multilingual, vernacular language* that capture the rhythm and authenticity of contemporary speech, an asset in poetry (Cahnmann, 2006).

One example of vernacular energy in syntax, diction, and spelling (note the lower case 'i') is found in Lucille Clifton's (1980, p. 167) short poem:

#### HOMAGE TO MY HAIR

when i feel her jump up and dance  
 i hear the music! my God  
 i'm talking about my nappy hair!  
 she is a challenge to your hand  
 black man,  
 she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens  
 black man,  
 she can touch your mind  
 with her electric fingers and  
 the grayer she do get, good God,  
 the blacker she do be!

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 University of Massachusetts Press.

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Rhythm is one of the dependable delights of Clifton's poetry, and all any reader need do to appreciate vernacular music is 'translate' Clifton's last two lines into 'standard' English, something like: 'the grayer she gets, good God, / the blacker she gets.' No comparison.

#### **Students' biliterate and bidialectal resources in poetry**

Creativity and critical thinking are practical, necessary life skills for all students, especially for those developing proficiency in English as a



second or additional language, who navigate within and across social and linguistic communities. Poetry is not reserved only for advanced-level learners or bonus class time. Rather, poetry names meaningful complications in students' lives, labelling the layers of our difficulties through essential language. As we strive to be and teach critical, multicultural readers and voters who make conscious ethical choices, we refuse false binaries between English and other languages, between 'gifted' students and ESOL learners (often referred to in the US as '*Limited English Proficient*'), or between standard and dialect languages. Rather, English educators can draw upon examples of multilingual and multicultural verse to help students affirm and act upon real complexities in a global economy.

To make these claims more concrete, consider an excerpt from the poem 'At the Party' by six-year-old 'Esperanza' who participated in our programme. While all students took place in our *taller* and published poems with their own and parents' consent, we use pseudonyms to protect identities of our young writers until they can publish on their own. Here, Esperanza responded to a prompt about parental rules:

#### I LOOK FOR MY SISTER

I have to have my eyes  
behind her,  
look for her,  
catch her playing games  
and not fighting with  
no one.

In poetry (as in jump-rope chants and other kinds of play), we enjoy the pleasures of repeated sounds. If Esperanza had written, 'and not fighting with / anyone', her lines would be 'correct', but they would lack her stress on the 'n' sound of 'not', 'no', and 'one', especially on 'no', the syllable which gives these lines their force as well as age and dialect identification. The lines as she wrote them, though not correct in 'standard' English, express an authoritative, culturally-identified voice. Next, consider the following poem written by 14-year-old Pilar in response to our question *Where is it that 'everyone looks at each other / no one minds'?* – a line from a poem we read together, '*La Plaza*' by Antonio Del Toro (1995, pp. 23–25).

#### THE MALL [First Draft]

Sometimes wen I go to the mall people stare at other  
people. Some people don't care if they stare at them but  
some people do. Like when some old man stares at a jung  
girl sometimes she feels nasty and well at leas I do.

Sometimes the people that sell the clothes they be staring at people like they going to still something and that makes them feel bad. But sometimes there is those people that are just ment for each other and wen they look at each other they imidiatly fall in love with each other.

While this poem is comprehensible, there are misspellings common to English language learners (e.g. wen, jung, leas, still, just, ment, imidiatly), and other errors in punctuation and grammar common to many native English dialect speakers. What was less clear was the extent to which grammar ‘errors’ were present or whether these errors were actual renderings of oral, vernacular, minority speech. This was an exciting opportunity to discuss the potential for poetry to capture ‘real speech’ as opposed to corrected ‘school speech’.

The English educator must distinguish between correcting English mistakes that can impede understanding and vernacular language that conveys nonstandard dialect (Cahnmann, 2006). Notice the difference between Pilar’s first draft and the version she published in our culminating anthology.

#### THE MALL [published draft]

Sometimes when I go to the mall, people stare at other people. Some people don’t care if they stare at them, but some people do. Like when some old man stares at a young girl, sometimes she feels nasty, and, well, at least I do. Sometimes the people that sell the clothes, they be staring at people like they going to steal something and that makes them feel bad. But sometimes there are those people that are just meant for each other and when they look at each other they immediately fall in love with each other.

‘They be staring at people like they going to steal something,’ was a choice to remain in the vernacular voice of a teenage Latina poet. This young poet embraced her own rhythms and permission to defy standard prescriptions for ‘appropriate’ language and content distanced from her experience.

### **Taking risks as a bilingual community**

Our ever-more-multicultural school communities send us, teachers and students alike, on unexpected journeys, and genuine exploration always requires risk. Poetry’s compressed investigations of personal and cultural struggles and linguistic tensions help us navigate new territories, becoming more comfortable with discomfort and unknowing. Roethke (2006), whose notebooks have been collected into a book on craft, spoke of all good poems as experiments wherein the writer pushes against his/

her personal and technical limits. To write poems, we must write toward, not away from, that which confuses and frightens.

Pilar's poem above exemplifies this point, touching upon aspects of sexuality she had recently become subject to as an adolescent female. Just as poetry allows a place for writing the taboo of vernacular language in the English classroom, poetry also allows students to address the dark places of their lived experience, seldom considered legitimate for classroom reading and writing. These dark places come with students whether they are addressed in class or not; when teachers provide an expressive classroom space, they affirm these lived difficulties are not classroom distractions, they are classroom materials.

The following example illustrates the evocative language and subject matter that emerge when teachers allow students' gritty realities to come out of the backpack and onto the page. 'What Dads Do' is a group-generated poem in response to a bilingual poem we read about mothers (Morfin, 1995, p. 26):

WHAT DADS DO: A GROUP POEM

*Bilingual Poetry Students, September 19, 2005*

They work at night fixing cars, making cookies,  
cooking BBQ and juicy hamburgers for dinner.  
Dads help Moms carry babies.  
Dads drive Toyotas, Mustangs, and monster trucks  
taller than a house – blue, red, and black.

Some Dads drive bulldozers tall  
as half a skyscraper or half a dinosaur.  
Some Dads make houses or parks.  
They fix our bikes.  
Some Dads get sad when they think  
about their Moms dying.

Dads get mad when you run  
in the store or when you touch all the clothes  
'*No tientan la ropa porque los dueños se enojen!*'\*  
Dads wrestle and women wrestle too,  
and Dads shout and cheer.  
Dads like to see *fútbol*†. Dads read to you  
about dinosaurs in English.  
Some Dads read to you in Spanish.  
That's how you learn Spanish.

Dads give you money:  
when you ask them,

for writing nice,  
for helping your brother.

Some Dads help with math homework  
that's pretty hard – times tables and division.  
Dads can be so smart.  
But Dads can get lost  
and say embarrassing things  
and get in trouble.

Some Dads drink beer  
and Moms say '*No tomes cerveza  
porque se va poner boracho mucho.*' †  
Some Dads want Moms to drink beer too.

\*

*\* Don't touch the clothes because the shop owners will  
get mad.*

† *Football (soccer)*

‡ *Don't drink beer because you'll get really drunk.*

In this poem, the reader enters a circuit of reciprocal care between children and fathers, a circle of tenderness and worry. The fathers in this poem take pride in auto repairs and skills at the grill, they help spouses with childcare, and they teach children to read; they also shout at the TV, drink too much beer, and 'get lost / and say embarrassing things / and get in trouble'. Fathers worry for their children in this poem, but children worry for their fathers too. The poem, though primarily composed in English, is peppered with Spanish interjections – the community's bilingual voice. By writing this poem together, our students discovered collective concerns and revealed those concerns to the reader, allowing any reader to imaginatively participate. Writing poetry provides a space to consider language and life together, to process cultural complexities within an inventive linguistic space.

### Teachers and students as writers

When students shared 'What Dads Do', the group experienced much pleasure, particularly at the taboo subject matter addressed in closing. What is not included in this poem – but what has remained urgent for us – was the discussion that accompanied the poem's composition. Participants raised other concerns regarding fathers. Having witnessed parents' and friends' abuse of alcohol and drugs, our student-poets expressed fears they could be separated from loved ones should a relative be arrested for drunk driving and be sent back to Mexico. Both teacher-researchers are educators, scholars, and poets, and were moved by students' revelations of their deepest worries and fears. To engage some of these concerns as an artist/teacher/researchers or 'a/r/t/

ographers' as Irwin and de Cosson (2004) suggest, Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor (2007) wrote 'Pinewood Estates Trailer Park', a poem excerpted below:

We read a poem  
 about what Moms do  
 and Dads do and they write  
 how some Dads speed  
 and get sent back  
 to México, some do cocaine  
 and *I knew a boy once*  
*who had white stuff coming out*  
*his nose and mouth and he died.*  
*Grass, some smoke that*  
 and a seven year old raises  
 an invisible joint to lips. *Not*  
*my Dad, says Yéssica,*  
*but some Dads*  
*do.*

Irwin and Springgay (2008) discuss a/r/tography as a method for exploring 'how practices inherent in the work of artists and educators are indeed forms of research'. In our case, poetry has served as a vehicle for creative expression as well as tools that help us meet the unexpected in education and research. Teachers must adapt to surprises – such as a student saying, 'I knew a boy once who had white stuff coming out his nose' (as one boy did in our *taller*) – and work to find creative solutions. The student's sense of *confianza* (Vélez-Ibañez, 1996) in the group allowed us to puzzle together a dialogue regarding drugs in the community, a topic that was distressing and real for many of our participants. Addressing unplanned topics can be fun and exciting, stressful and dangerous. Poetry offers a playful, nourishing way for artist/researcher/teachers to practice swerves and changes on the fly, writing our way into and through unexpected mental, emotional, and linguistic territory.

### **Bilingual writing process vs. product**

Writing is like mathematics in that some students, daunted by their early struggles, have internalised the idea that they are irredeemably unskilled. Negative inner monologues like 'I'm bad at that' create a self-fulfilling loop of frustration and shame. These feelings can grow into especially high hurdles for bilingual students, many of whom have been shamed by early experiences in monolingual English classrooms. Fortunately, cultural and linguistic explorations in poetry proceed slowly for everyone, and 'writing poetry' does not mean sitting down with a blank page and getting up with a publishable poem. On the contrary, poetry trains one to be

patient, not to bid a poem to appear within the confines of a 45-minute period or even a 1.5-hour English block. For example, keeping a poetry journal helps all students, especially those who have learned to fear writing in English, experience writing as sustained engagement with multiple drafts. The practice of a daily poetry journal emphasises process over product. Engagement in this process allows attention to writing itself and not to fears of writing.

Emphasis on the drafting process benefits both monolingual and multilingual writers, the fearful and the confident. The word ‘revision’ is built of ‘re-’ and ‘vision’: when we revise a poem, we do not merely make mechanical corrections; we see it afresh, and then we re-write it. Keeping a poetry journal – perhaps with the help of writing prompts from a teacher – and developing those journal entries into drafts helps students experience a writing process which is personally relevant and playful, as well as more sophisticated, more reflective of post-classroom writing practices: ‘professional’ poets make many notes, but produce comparatively few finished poems. This participation in a playful drafting process does not mean relaxing standards for ‘polished’ work in any genre, and ultimately yields more impressive final products: where drafting is a pleasure, students are more likely to engage seriously with revision. Daily writing improves fluency for native English speakers and second-or-additional language speakers alike; poetry journals encourage students to become not only more willing, but also more effective writers.

### **Examples of student re-visioning**

The following are some examples of student poems that deepened given initial conversations about revision, as well as speculations and recommendations about how to continue such conversations with students. Our first example comes from 12-year-old Antonio, who also wrote a poem in response to the prompt: ‘Where is it that “everyone looks at each other / no one minds”?’ His poem, like the earlier example from 14-year-old Pilar, is set in the see-and-be-seen setting of a mall, but in this case, the writer is concerned less with sexual projection and more with race. Here’s Antonio’s first draft:

#### THE MALL [First Draft]

In the mall evey looks at  
 evey body some do not  
 mine, but some do because  
 pravali of there rice or a  
 a other thing.

And here is the second draft, following a conversation with Antonio about his intentions:

## THE MALL [Published Draft]

In the mall everybody looks at  
everybody. Some do not  
mind, but some do because  
probably of their race or  
another thing.

The first puzzle to solve was what Antonio meant by ‘pravali’ and ‘rice’. Once he had explained his interests in the piece, it became clear that he was asking complicated questions about the racial power of the gaze. Because our *taller* was voluntary and we worked on a different composition with our student-poets every session, it was difficult to keep going through multiple drafts over multiple sessions. However, in a classroom setting with a regular schedule, an English educator could take advantage of the opportunity to ask Antonio which people mind being looked at, and by whom. Why does race matter when we look? This is a poem requesting the attention of a sustained drafting process, one that is unafraid to look head-on at taboo subjects such as racial profiling and discrimination.

Our next example of revision development is 11-year-old Manuel’s response to a prompt, which asked students to imagine flying above their communities:

## FLYING ABOVE MY COMMUNITY [Published Draft]

I see motor cars.  
I see schools.  
  
I hear rock music.  
I hear kids laughing.  
  
I taste pizza.  
I taste hamburgers and hotdogs.  
  
I hope I am a superhero.  
I hope I am the new Spiderman.

Manuel’s poem begins ordinarily enough, with the observations ‘I see motor cars. / I see schools’. The students’ prompt included a request that they engage as many senses as possible, and so Manuel’s poem proceeds through music he hears and foods he tastes. As the poem concludes, hopes begin to surface with the lines, ‘I hope I am a superhero. / I hope I am the new Spiderman.’ When Dorine Preston (co-author) sat down to discuss this piece with Manuel, she saw crossed-out scribbles, and asked what he had eliminated: he dissolved in a fit of nervous giggles. It took some coaxing to encourage Manuel to reveal the superhero desires that had embarrassed him, but provided his most interesting language. At

Preston's urging, he restored the superhero element of this poem. In a setting which allowed for more sustained engagement with drafts, Preston might have been able to ask Manuel to develop this superhero theme for a richer portrait of one speaker's wishes for a major role in his community.

Our last example comes from another group-generated poem, this one called 'Music Mix 1'. This is the first of several collages we made together from what students wrote while listening to music montages:

MUSIC MIX 1

*Bilingual Poetry Students, October 24, 2005*

I am in a big party in Mexico city  
and I am with my family.

Reminds me of a dance  
that I danced with a boy.

Reminds me of a lot of girls  
who are *cholas* when they are in the street.

Reminds me when I first  
had a boyfriend and more.

This mix is one complete poem which establishes a present-moment setting, the 'big party in Mexico city', and then lists associations with that setting. The poem is spoken from within the safety of the family, but it references a young person's ventures into larger social settings and the world of sexual possibilities and dangers. This self-contained poem was assembled from moments of clarity pulled from surrounding text like the following excerpts from student notes:

Also dancing having a party  
Bikes people walking  
And breathing rain  
Cat dogs

A poet-teacher's discerning eye can help students select what is most interesting in their work and identify structural elements – in this case, the tendency to start lines with 'reminds' – to anchor the finished piece. Writing over time enables student-writers to experience the poetry portfolio, much like professional writers do, collecting drafts over time and making revisions that respond to questions regarding sensory images, fresh diction, and rhythmic quality, among other poetic concerns.

### **Implications for the English educator**

Multilingual and multicultural poetry and exploration help to sustain the interest and development of students and teachers alike. Our after-school



poetry *taller* allowed us certain liberties that are not possible within most secondary English classrooms – such as the invitation, rather than requirement that adolescent poet-students attend, accompanied by family members. However, the process and products of this *taller* reveal exciting possibilities for English educators desiring to privilege all points along bilingual continua.

Read aloud, contemporary bidialectal and bilingual poems not only encourage students to tap into their own varied linguistic resources, but can also lead students to the riches of writers in the English canon such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Blake and Burns. These early writers, like the student-poets in our programme, employed verse and vernaculars to address taboo contemporary concerns with language, class, and sexuality.

Poetry is the ideal place in the curriculum for students to give language to the unsayable, requiring students and teachers alike to lose words and worlds of comfort and complicity and to write through ambiguities and uncertainties. Students must struggle with these uncertainties with or without classroom writing, but classroom poetry writing can help students name their difficulties, and so learn to know and live with them. Critic Cixous (1993, p. 10) writes, 'To be human we need to ... discover that there is more than one world and that the world isn't what we think it is.' English educators who take responsibility for teaching in, around, and through taboos of race, class, language, and sexuality have the opportunity to help students use verse to approach the dimensionality and urgency of these subjects, thereby charging their curricula with relevance to students' lives, which in turn inspires students to be more self-motivated learners and writers.

As artist/teacher/researchers or 'a/r/t/ographers' (Irwin and de Cosson, 2004) we were able to guide our students' writing as poets and multicultural explorers. Varying our course through the writing of individual and group-generated poems, listening for meaning rather than insisting always on 'correct' grammar and spelling, are freedoms we imagine within the context of a poetry unit in English classrooms. Re-visioning is an important component of classroom instruction, as well as in poem-making. We need to ask ourselves, *if* our classroom *could* be any way we liked, what would we need to change? We are therefore inviting English educators to imagine with us what could happen *if* some of the same liberties we have taken were to be replicated within the primary and secondary public school settings. How might multi-age learners write together? What *if* students and teachers wrote about topics such as language, race, class, sexuality, and ability/disability, among others? What *if* more teachers were encouraged to write alongside their students, puzzling out their own meanings through verse rather than concentrating on managing English production for what is or is not

correct? What *if* teachers modelled for their students their own comfort with both the messy stages of early poem drafting and the meticulous inquiry of revision? We conclude with more questions and curiosities than answers, but, as one of our students wrote, '*Espero luz*': 'I hope for light.'

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