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# Efficacy and Agency with African American Bidialectal Students in Face-to-Face and Online Classes

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I am a minority. As an English-speaking Canadian living for years in the French part of Canada, I knew what it meant to be a minority, shunned because my accent revealed my heritage. However, when I joined the faculty at Elizabeth City State University (ECSU), one of the nation's historically black colleges (HBCU) in North Carolina, and moved from the financial capital of Canada to small town USA, I discovered what it meant to be a racial minority based on skin color. I was pleased to find, however, that my minority status did not inspire rejection; to the contrary, I experienced acceptance from the academic community of professors and students. Not only did I exchange sky scrapers for corn fields, but also the second language of French for the euphony of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). While not all African American students identify AAVE as their dominant dialect, there are many students who are bidialectal at both HBCUs and other state comprehensive universities (SCU). The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) represents 38 of the 106 historically black colleges and universities in the US, including ECSU. Moreover, according to their 2013 Annual Report, at least half of the student population at 76 AASCU schools are minority students, and AASCU member institutions educate around 51 percent of all minority students, including 63 percent of all African-American students. During my five years of teaching at ECSU, I have found that an instructor's efficacy with African American bidialectal students is not based on his or her skin color or dialect; rather, it is based on the depth to which he or she understands the African American student's culture and identity, and the implications these two elements have on a student's agency. Determining the best strategies to promote student agency can be fraught with challenges (Czerniewicz, Williams, & Brown, 2008). In order for professors to be rhetorically effective, they must first understand that their African American students have internal contention based on racial performance that forms a juxtaposition between black identity and white "academic" expectations, and this juxtaposition will ultimately have an impact on the African American student's approach to his or her educational experience.

## African American Identity Formation and AAVE

Over a century ago, W.E.B. Dubois argued that the central problem of American society was rooted in color, and this insight has proven prophetic. Social psychology identifies a dichotomy faced by African Americans who identify strongly with being African American,

yet are frustrated by perceived societal stigma attached to that identity (Rowley, Seller, Chavous, & Smith, 1998). Toni Morrison (2002), a renowned African American author, in reaction to the racial stigma perceived within society asserts that “it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us....[African Americans] are the subject of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience” (p. 31-2). This contention proclaimed by Morrison is still being navigated by the African American students who struggle with the challenge of black racial authenticity. Young (2003), an African American professor at the University of Kentucky, identifies this as the “burden of racial performance” (p. 58) and encourages African American students to consider their racial heritage and proudly incorporate it into their educational experience. This same encouragement needs to be aimed at instructors who are challenged to engage their African American students on a level that rhetorically motivates them to learn.

African American culture is steeped in a history that birthed a Black voice rife with angst and vibrant with emotion. I hear this voice on the campus, echoing in the halls, and surfacing during the discussions in the classroom. At times, our classroom conversation turns to African American culture, and during those moments, I become the student. Those sitting before me share a perspective from history that is unfamiliar to me as a Canadian. Through their eyes, I see a past that is often muted in history books, but is dynamic in the development of their identity. Fabre & O’ Meally (1994) explain how present culture is formed through the coupling of history and memory—that African American “history is not so much a fixed, objective rendering of ‘the facts’ as it is a process of rethinking and reworking in a world of chance and change” (p. 3). The present identity of African American college students is situated in their understandings of race within the context of their own personal experiences within the African American culture, as exemplified by their use of AAVE.

AAVE is not lazy man’ s English (Champion, Cobb-Roberts, & Bland-Steward, 2012); it is a formal dialect known as a “variety of a language” when considered from a linguistic perspective (Holton, 1984, p. 40). This linguistic perspective addresses the description of language from three perspectives—pronunciation, grammar, and lexical features—that affirm the validity of the vernacular as an organized dialect (Holton, 1984). Holton identifies distinguishing characteristics of AAVE that incorporate a logical pattern that controls the grammatical features. In other words, AAVE is a systematic approach to language with predictable patterns. These features of AAVE include pronunciation features like the reduction of consonant clusters by leaving off the -ed at the end of a word, or the pronunciation of -s when forming the plural. Grammatical features of African American English include the verb system, negation, and noun endings that provide examples of a consistent grammatical approach to the organization of AAVE. Finally, there are lexical features of African American English. Smitherman (1977) explains that four traditions have had a direct impact on the lexical development of African American English, including West

African language background, servitude and oppression, music, and the traditional Black Church. A distinct vocabulary has emerged known as Black Language, and that language includes metonymy, metaphor, signifying, and punning. It is important that the Standard English (SE) speaking instructor with bidialectal students in their classroom understand the validity of the vernacular. It is not our job to change the way our AAVE speaking students communicate; rather, it is our responsibility to value their form of communication while enhancing their communication skills with a better command of SE in the appropriate settings.

Richard L. Wright (2003) affirms that there is both an ideological and a political nature to all discourse and argues that language as discourse plays a fundamental role in the development of the African American ethos. He believes that the “word is the primary means of forming, informing, and transforming consciousness” (p. 86). As instructors, we need to consider not just the formation of AAVE, but the intentions and attitudes that are connected with the development and implementation of the dialect. When instructors understand the validity of the dialect and the identity that is connected with the dialect, the instructor’s perspective should shift toward embracing the rhetorical dynamic associated with the speech patterns of the bidialectal African American student. There is a rhetorical aspect to language use amongst some African Americans, and this should not be discounted when considering the development of the African American voice within the academic setting.

Another aspect to consider is the original development of the dialect and the social implications connected with that development. AAVE is rooted in a pidgin language, a blend of African languages and European English that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at the height of slave trade between Africa and the New World. This historical development of the dialect is important because it is based on a hegemonic dynamic between the white slave traders and the African slaves. Tradition sites the development of this dialect “first as a protective maneuver [and] later as a means of preserving a sense of separate identity” (Holton, 1984, p. 48). In other words, the dialect serves as a coded language that was meant to keep whites from understanding what was being said, and eventually it served as a way to maintain the African American identity (Holton, 1984). The history of AAVE involves a systematic development of a dialect along with the prioritizing of an ethnic identity. This two pronged historical development of AAVE must be considered within the SCU system, especially if educators want to have influence and credibility with their AAVE speaking students.

Also seen within the historical development of dialects is the impact of European colonization in American and how it has accelerated language endangerment. Within the colonization process, there was a sense of powerlessness amongst the people who were forced to embrace the accepted form of communication, known now as Standard English,

at the expense of their indigenous language/dialect (Mufwene, 2003). This angst was experienced within the African American community. However, during the Harlem Renaissance period, there was a resurgence of African American pride that gave credence to the beauty and power of the African American vernacular. Since AAVE is a systematic approach to language rooted in identity, Christensen (2009) encourages educators to recognize the racial pride connected with the vernacular and the importance of honoring the students' dialects. In order to better understand the implications of the vernacular on the educational experience of my students, I conducted a simple three question survey in order to determine if the vernacular has an impact on the way the students want to learn.

### AAVE Preference Survey

Elizabeth City State University enrolls approximately 3000 students. All are required to take the first year composition course, which is one of the courses that I teach. Because these classes provide a good representation of males and females, as well as age and ethnicities on the campus, I decided to informally survey the students who were part of the first year composition classes in order to establish the language or dialect they considered dominant in their own communication, and to also discover specific communication needs for AAVE speaking students. Just over three hundred students were surveyed. The first question identified their dominant language or dialect. One quarter of the respondents claimed the vernacular as their dominant way of communicating with friends and family, and three quarters of the respondents identified Standard English (SE) as their dominant language. The next two survey questions were designed with the intention of determining the student's preference regarding communication styles between instructor and the student. Both questions provided a numerical response from one to ten, with one being strongly disagree and ten being strongly agree. The first of these two questions addressed instructions given and their desire for verbal instructions compared to written instructions. The second of these two questions addressed feedback and their preference for verbal feedback compared to written feedback. Any indications between one and five demonstrated a lesser desire for that form of communication identified, and indications between six and ten indicated a stronger desire for that form of interaction. The numerical results from the survey are summarized below.

Instructions given:	
SE speaking students with a stronger desire for written instructions	87%

VE speaking students with a stronger desire for written instructions	47%
SE speaking students with a stronger desire for verbal instructions	7%
VE speaking students with a stronger desire for verbal instructions	32%

Feedback received:	
SE speaking students with a stronger desire for written feedback	33%
VE speaking students with a stronger desire for written feedback	0%
SE speaking students with a stronger desire for verbal feedback	7%
VE speaking students with a stronger desire for verbal feedback	27%

Indications of an equal desire for both verbal and written:	
SE speaking students with an equal desire for both written and verbal instructions	7%
VE speaking students with an equal desire for both written and verbal instructions	21%
SE speaking students with an equal desire for both written and verbal feedback	60%
VE speaking students with an equal desire for both written and verbal feedback	73%

These results indicate that most SE speaking students who participated in this survey prefer written instructions, and most AAVE speaking students who participated in this survey preferred both written and verbal feedback; however, it is significant to note that none of AAVE speaking students indicate a desire for just written feedback. Overall, the results from the numerical section of this survey indicate that the SE speaking students have a stronger comfort level with written instructions and feedback than do the AAVE speaking students. These numerical indicators, addressing the preferences the students have regarding their interaction when receiving information from their instructor, provide a framework for considering their reasons for their responses. The reason for their numerical indication was given when they answered the question “why?” However, not all the students provided answers to the “why?” section, limiting the selection of answers for our consideration. What follows are representative statements from the written answers provided by the students. These reasons provide insight into the rhetorical dynamic students need in order to experience greater agency within a classroom setting, thus giving instructors insight into the best scenario to promote student agency for both the SE and AAVE speaking students.

### Implications for the Face-to-Face Classroom

A number of written responses concerning the student’ s need for either verbal or written communication from the instructor can be applied to a face-to-face classroom setting. In the responses, many of the students identified the availability of verbal interaction as an important factor. One African American student who identified SE as her dominant language explained that she placed a high value on verbal instruction and feedback because a face-to-face classroom setting allowed her to practice her Standard English while hearing academic grammar from her instructor. Another SE speaking African American student explained that the face-to-face classroom allows for the opportunity for extended discussion on topics so that the material can be better understood. The white SE speaking students also had some comments regarding the advantages of being in a face-to-face classroom where a combination of verbal and written instructions and feedback can be received. One SE speaking white student explained that the verbal instructions supported by written material is a helpful combination when provided by an instructor. Another SE speaking white student explained that it is important that he receive written instructions so that he has a point of reference, and that he appreciates when his instructor provides this for the students.

Both of these SE speaking groups appreciate the agency that occurs in a face-to-face classroom setting because of the verbal modelling, extended discussion, and the combination of both the verbal and written instructions provided by the instructor. Both groups expressed the positive elements within the face-to-face class and the role the

instructor has; however, it is important to note how some of the AAVE speaking students who participated in the survey provided insightful comments concerning the instructor's role as the agent during the rhetorical process within the face-to-face classroom setting where verbal and written instructions and feedback can be experienced. One AAVE speaking student explained that a teacher helps make the information clear and without the teacher's insight into the material, it is difficult for her to assimilate the information from the textbook. Another AAVE speaking student expressed the importance of the role of the teacher when he wrote, "I want a teacher to explain things to me" ; in other words, for these students, the instructor's verbal assistance plays a key role in the student's agency. Overall, the AAVE speaking students' comments demonstrate that there is a strong connection between the student's agency and the instructor's verbal interaction in the learning process. While SE speaking students desired instructor interaction and saw the value of varied forms of communication in the face-to-face classroom experience, it is key that instructors recognize that the AAVE speaking students have a more urgent need to experience a rhetorical connection with the instructor, and that connection needs to be clear and consistent.

### Implications for an Online Class

The face-to-face classroom connection between instructor and student is one way that education occurs, but there is also the online classroom to consider. First impressions in an online setting can be somewhat masked. Wills (2001) explains how many researchers claim that an online setting masks differences in race, class, age and gender; however, this author asserts that "web-based self-constructions do not necessarily wish to be gender, race, class, or ethnicity invisible or neutral" (p. 3). In other words, online students still want to be known. Their ethnicity, along with other aspects about their identity, have an impact on who they are and on the way they learn (Ornstein & Levine, 1982). Steiner and Smith (1979) explain that there is "an interaction . . . [between the] cognitive process. . . [and] the cultural and social contexts in which they develop" (p. 1). Thus, it is important for SCU online instructors to consider the potential of having an AAVE speaking student in their online class, and how the AAVE speaking student's identity is revealed through the use of dialect indicators in their written responses. It is also important for the instructor to recognize that a bidialectal African American student's identity, which is rooted in language development, will have an impact on the online learning experience. The survey given in the composition classes allowed for a "why?" response where the students were able to provide some insight as to their desire for verbal and/or written communication in an online class.

The students' written responses on the survey indicated that SE speaking students appreciate the face-to-face interaction, but also find value in written communication; however, the AAVE speaking students demonstrated that they need face-to-face connection with the instructor in order to better navigate instructions or understand



feedback. These conclusions are illustrated in the students' responses from the survey. One SE speaking African American student explained that written instructions and feedback are important to her because the material can serve as a reference point when working on the assignment. Another SE speaking white student shared the challenge he faces of remembering what was said by the teacher; whereas, the written document is a permanent reminder of the teacher's instruction or feedback. These two students represent the general comments written by the SE speaking students. On the other hand, one AAVE speaking student explained that he liked the opportunity to discuss the material with the instructor. Another AAVE speaking student wrote that she likes talking with the instructor in order to get any questions answered. These were also representative comments. Of course, the face-to-face interaction is difficult to experience when the class is a text-based online course where the instructions and feedback are provided in written form, hence, the challenge for AAVE speaking students who are looking for the face-to-face interaction in order to improve their agency.

This simple three-question survey I conducted provided some insight into the vernacular-speaking student's desire to have face-to-face interaction with an instructor where he or she can interact with the instructor concerning the information being discussed. However, I wanted to further investigate the conclusions from this survey given to my composition classes, so I examined an online class, and I discovered some indicators that supported the findings from my survey. What follows is the process and discoveries made through observation of an online class.

### Observations from an Online Class

The online audience of the 21st century, as a rhetorician's focal point, is racially mixed; thus, the cultural dynamic that is part of the construct of the online audience must be a consideration (McIntyre, 2002) as our focus for research is narrowed to the audience of one online classroom at the HBCU where I teach. As an English instructor at this predominately African American university, I recognized that the English department provided a natural setting to assess a Blackboard online class and observe the interaction and communication styles that occurred within the discussion element of the online class. Although limited in scope, the purpose of this research was to identify through the online discussion what was the dominant language/dialect spoken by the online students and the degree to which the online students indicated their need for immediate instructor interaction and/or face-to-face interaction in order to experience student agency.

Before looking at the specifics within the online class, it is important to consider once again the impact of language. Standard English is linear and writer responsible (Kubota & Lehner, 2004) whereas African Americans whose dominant dialect is AAVE employ other rhetorical styles that include global thinking and group interaction (Hecht, Jackson II, & Ribeau, 2003;

Bennett, 1998). The communication style of AAVE speaking students is one reason why some students experience difficulty learning in the online classroom, especially when their ability to code switch is ineffective. Also, higher education teachers are often limited by their predisposed notions about language and how it impacts, or does not impact, the learning process for their African American online students, and this can certainly be applied to the SCU where SE is the accepted language of communication in both the face-to-face classroom and the online classroom (Ball & Lardner, 2005). Another aspect to consider is a form-content approach to online learning (Welch, 2005). Form-content has a sole focus on “content,” which is a dominant aspect of online education and can potentially disadvantage online students whose struggle with an approach that is solely based on written content.

Keeping in mind the written, content focused setting of an online class and the different learning styles present in a potentially linguistically mixed online class, I assessed a particular online class that consisted of ten students, nine were African American and one was white. Through the analysis of the online discussion, I discovered that there was a student, whom I will address as Student A, in this English class whose formative language was AAVE. In my analysis of the online class, there were a number of indicators that Student A's communication style incorporated AAVE. These indicators were seen in her discussion board posts where there were issues regarding verb tenses and subject/verb agreement, which are indicators of AAVE (Holton, 1984, p. 43). On the other hand, the other nine students had a clear command of SE. Also, the instructor's posts were all written in Standard English, but three of the five replies written by Student A contained AAVE elements. The interaction between the online instructor and the ten students remained frequent and positive throughout the semester, and this could be seen in the group discussion on the discussion board that allowed the students and instructor to interact with one another. Also, the online group work, in the group section of Blackboard, provided a setting that allowed just the students to interact with each other. These two platforms of exchange provided an opportunity to examine the language used and the importance of instructor interaction between online students and the online instructor.

There are two aspects of AAVE communication that need to be considered when assessing African American online students whose formative language is AAVE. First, there is call response, which is “spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements are punctuated by expressions” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 104). Secondly, there is the element of immediate feedback, which is another aspect that is intrinsic to the communication style of AAVE speakers (Smitherman, 1977; Woodyard, 2003; Cummings and Latta, 2003). Unfortunately, the dynamic of call response is not a part of the traditional design of an online class. Also, immediate feedback, which happens in a face-to-face classroom, is not easily replicated in an online class unless a

chat room is established. In the online class assessed, the only communication that occurred was written communication, which is the typical default form of communication between online instructors and their online students (Crawford, 2004; Bernard et al., 2004). Crawford (2004) acknowledges that in America, SE is the academic language of choice used within academic domains. Also, within the traditional implementation of online classes, written SE is the mode of communication used by most instructors (West, Waddoups, & Graham, 2007)

In researching the need for call response and immediate feedback for African American online students whose dominant dialect is AAVE, I analyzed the exchanges that occurred in the online groups organized by the instructor where written interaction concerning the students' projects were recorded. In every other group, the nine SE speaking students' interaction demonstrated understanding of the task and confidence in accomplishing the task. However, in Student A's group, there were some indicators that Student A was longing for a call response dynamic as well as direct feedback between her other group members. Student A began the written dialogue on the group discussion board by being the first to post. Also, Student A made comments four times more often than any of the other students in her group. She posted comments that indicated her need for immediate feedback, comments like "Have any of you all started or tried to do some of the project?" The dates on the group site indicate that after Student A's comment to the rest of the group about starting the project, there was a two day lapse where no one responded to her comments. Although Student A was looking for immediate feedback, she did not receive it in the group setting because the online group setting did not allow for real time "chatting" to occur. This student also posted this comment to her group, "Hey yall! I will go to [our teacher's] office and get directions as to how to complete this assignment," indicating her need for a face-to-face interaction where she could potentially experience immediate feedback and call response. It is interesting also to note that no one else in Student A's group indicated a need for teacher interaction; they just did not respond to Student A's questions, so this student decided to go to the instructor for answers. Through my analysis of Student A's online classroom experience, it was apparent that the style of delivery in an online setting was a challenge for this student. As a result, it is important for all online instructors to consider the impact of an instructor's approach that just includes a linear, written form of online communication, and how this sole approach could create a rhetorical challenge for other AAVE speaking students who are a part of an online class.

Furthermore, there was evidence indicating that the instructor in the online class under observation indicated a positive attitude when interacting with the students through her use of smiley face icons, words of praise, and encouraging comments. However, it is also apparent that the design of the online class that only uses text-based communication does not consider the communication style of an AAVE speaking student who is looking for more than just encouraging words—she is looking for call response, tonal semantics, body gestures,

and immediate feedback (Smitherman, 1977). The design of this text based online class does, however, suit a SE speaking audience that is comfortable learning in a linear environment where written communication is used as the only mode of communication. Blackwell (2010) charges that in both theory and practice, AAVE speaking students are often rendered invisible in a text based online class since the structure of the traditional online class benefits SE speaking students, yet serves as a rhetorical challenge for the African American student. Kynard (2007) believes there is a type of binary thinking within academia where SE is on the one side, and dialects of SE are on the “other” side, and when an online instructor’s only form of communication with his or her online students is done in written SE, this will disadvantage all those who approach education from the “other” side. As a result, in an online setting, those students who do not approach learning with a linear, content-based approach, could potentially seek out face-to-face instructor interaction in order to experience agency, and this is seen in Student A’s online experience in the online classroom setting.

### Pedagogical Strategies for Improved Instructor Efficacy

Teacher efficacy within the SCU system where AAVE speaking students are potentially part of the class roster is a consideration in both the online and face-to-face classrooms. The instructor’s influence needs to be rhetorical in order for all students to experience agency; however, there needs to be specific attention given to the needs of the AAVE speaking students who require a different approach than the SE speaking students.

In the face-to-face classroom, the instructor needs to recognize the importance of providing verbal modelling, extended discussion, and the combination of both the verbal and written instructions for all students, and further clarification and availability will be needed for the AAVE speaking student. In the online class setting, the rhetorical process becomes a greater challenge for AAVE speaking students who do not engage as effectively in a linear, written forum. Therefore, the arrangement of the material for the dissemination of information needs to be assembled effectively. In a face-to-face classroom, this might mean more discussion time or group work. In an online class, the teacher could incorporate a synchronous space where chatting is able to take place. However, it is important to place an emphasis on clarity. In a face-to-face classroom, this means that the instructor needs to allow for question and answer times so that the AAVE speaking students will have the opportunity to experience call response. Also, this type of interaction needs to occur in the online class. This might involve Skyping or phone conversations if a campus visit during office hours is not practical.

There are many challenges that an instructor in the SCU system faces when trying to communicate effectively with their students; however, flexibility is a key factor in developing efficacy. There will be times when the instructor will need to step out of the planned

approach to delivering material and consider what deviations might need to occur in order for better student agency to happen. In a face-to-face classroom, this impromptu time is often recognized when a student raises his or her hand, indicating the potential need for deviation. Most professors in a face-to-face classroom are quick to pick up on the need for further clarification. However, a student's indicator for the need for further interaction in an online class can be difficult for an online instructor to recognize, and if that need is identified, it is often a challenge for the instructor to deviate from the pre-set plan for disseminating information. Therefore, it is important for online instructors to watch for indicators that come through emails or posts regarding a student's confusion or the need for further explanation. Student A provided a good example of an indicator for the need for further explanation and the desire to have face-to-face contact with the instructor. The online professor will be able to pick up on these indicators when he or she provides forums where the student is able to indicate his or her need to pause in the instructional time for further explanation.

In a face-to-face classroom, the instructor will use his or her voice and gestures to build efficacy with the students; however, this element is often absent in an online class. Once the instructor understands that the AAVE speaking student actually needs body gestures and vocalics (Hecht, Jackson II, and Ribeau, 2003) to aid in the cognitive process, the instructor will be able to prioritize the incorporation of a multi-modal approach to online teaching that allows the bidialectal African American student to experience non-verbal cues. Knowing that the AAVE speaking students need visual and verbal elements can present a challenge to some online professors who are not comfortable veering away from the traditional written approach to disseminating information within an online class. However, if instructor efficacy is to improve, then varied forms of delivery must be incorporated into the online classroom experience. Most SCUs have lecture capture available to online instructors. It is vital that online instructors take the opportunity to learn how to use this technology and then make it a priority to include this technology in their online classes.

## Conclusion

Instructor efficacy prioritizes the student, which results in a learner-centered approach. Angelino, Williams, & Natvig (2007) explain an important initial step in building teacher efficacy: "In using the learner-centered approach, educators should open lines of communication with students as early as possible" (p. 7). When a student sees the instructor's initiative and knows that the instructor understands the cultural impact on the learning process, then this will build into the student's value, identity, self-esteem, and ultimately, agency. Racial salience "refers to the extent to which a person's race is a relevant part of her or his self-concept at a particular moment in time" (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous & Smith, 1998, p. 717). There are times in the educational process when a student's race has a direct impact on the educational experience. As instructors within the SCU system, we must interpret

“context, ways of knowing, language abilities, and experience . . . [in order to] . . . enrich our interpretive views” (Royster, 1996). SCU instructors have a significant, collective impact on the educational experience within a university setting, and this influence will aid in the promotion of students’ agency when the instructor embraces an approach that is effective for all students (Perryman-Clark, 2009). Instructors have the privilege to respond enthusiastically to the opportunity to celebrate their racially mixed school and the varied students who walk the campus and enter their classroom. In order to honor this privileged opportunity, it is vital that SCU educators work toward an improved efficacy that will inspire student agency not only for our SE speaking students, but also for our bidialectal African American students who are a valued part of the SCU student body.

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