

From Dirt to Discourse

By Michael Moreno

Academic literacy is all about adaptation. It's taking what you know, what others have said, what others would say, what you would say and what others would expect you to say and shaping those competing priorities into something manageable and meaningful. Some who study academic literacy call that pressurized cacophony "chaos." And, while I do find it somewhat amusing that someone with my own story – a statistical anomaly, for sure – would end up in a discussion about academic literacy, I also find that I am adept at making sense out of chaos and thriving in spite of it.

I grew up in a family of American migrant farmworkers. Naturally, we lived in poverty and moved from season to season, which meant I attended many schools. I did not engage in anything remotely like academic discourse with my parents. School was not a constant in my life anyway; only work was. While I don't remember a lot about my writing experiences in those days, I can say that I learned very early on that both reading and writing give you power and control over your life. To learn that lesson, you need only fill out a form or read a letter for a parent who cannot.

School work let my mind go somewhere else, away from the desperation and repetition of my life. In the fields, I had a function: I was to go up and down rows of cotton with a hoe and cut down weeds for hours while being beaten by the sun. In the classroom, I was something more: I was a thinker who could read, write, count, memorize and apply. This is why I have a strong connection to Mike Rose's teaching mantra: "Students will float to the mark you set."

I credit Pizza Hut, in part, for my fascination with reading and writing. I'd never had the divine cuisine before a schoolteacher got me involved in the company's reading-incentive program, and I quickly became a fan of reading books, writing about books and eating free personal pan pizzas. I'd long known that manual labor put food on the table, but the program taught me that being a reader, thinker and writer could, too.

Once, a young teacher took my class outside and had us read aloud from Shakespeare. Shakespeare, now that was something special. Here was this guy who wrote hundreds of years ago, bringing me pleasure that far surpassed free pizza or throwing the game-winning shot in basketball. He, through his words, was immortal. He was somebody. I, meanwhile, was nobody, just a scrawny, poor kid from the fields.

It was then that I realized imitation was a good first step in writing, as it had been in my work at the cotton gins. After all, if I wanted to know how to do something in the gin, I'd watch somebody do it, and then I'd do it. It's safe to say that my first poem was plagiarized, save a word or two. But it was a start.

Later, my junior high basketball coach and history teacher told me -- when I was sent to the office to get paddled for fighting with my nemesis -- that I was smart, should stay out of trouble and graduate, and then I could get out of the fields. "Graduate." My mother made it through the 10th grade, and my father made it through the 7th grade. Coach Anders set a new mark for me to float to. I kept at it.

By the time my senior year in high school came around, my parents were long gone. I was living alone in an apartment in North Carolina. A friend's family gave me a couch to sleep on. Thanks to their support and help, I was accepted to college! It wasn't really something I could afford. I went back to the cotton gins after graduation. Later I attended a university nearby. I kept writing.

I then embarked on a career in technology, because it seemed practical, and I was good at it. Business writing has its own conventions, of course, and I again adapted my writing largely through imitation. I read existing letters, reports and contracts and modeled mine after them.

As my career progressed, the writing projects for which I was responsible became increasingly more substantial and important. Once, I found myself at The Carter Center in Atlanta, hurriedly drafting a high-dollar proposal for a fact-finding mission by my company on behalf of an African government. Another time, I found myself writing up an incident report just minutes after having my life threatened at a checkpoint in the borderlands. I had to find clarity in the chaos.

When I decided to finish my English degree at the University of Houston in 2006, I took a class titled "Vision and Power" taught by Karen Fang. I understood the material and actively participated in the in-class discussions. I knew how to verbally make my case. Yet during a private meeting with Fang, she made clear that, despite taking positions and successfully supporting them in class, my essays were not up to par.

She gave me two other students' essays to use as models. I soon saw that, even if we – the two other students and I – were having the same discussion in our essays, they were doing it differently. The primary difference was this: I was trying on the voice of the scholars and making a mess of it, and they were using their own voices and making their points. I didn't believe that my own ideas were valid, so I was relying heavily on scholars' and critics' ideas and language; meanwhile, my two classmates were writing about their own ideas in their own words and simply using the ideas and language of others to provide support or distinctions.

It all came down to confidence, and, like a lot of students, I couldn't muster much at first. After all, we are told we must get degrees to get good-paying, respectable jobs, to become intellectuals or authorities who are worthy of being paid attention. And, yet, college students are expected to write in the voice of authorities at the starting line of the degree-getting route. It's not surprising I was slow to catch on.

In the years since that “Vision and Power” course, I’ve finished grad school and taught hundreds of students. I’ve become more confident about my place in the world of ideas and words, and I have become more sensitive to the forces and conventions keeping out those people who’ve arrived at the door of academic discourse by unconventional means or with unconventional modes of thinking.

Contributing to the discussion, in my mind, does not mean supporting a closed system or operating in an echo chamber; it means finding your own voice and your own place. This was challenging for me as a student, and I know it is for my students. Luckily, adaptation comes naturally to all of us. It is a teacher’s grand challenge to convincingly communicate that truth and give emerging writers the tools with which they will forge new ideas and, even, identities.