Shut Up and Listen
Teaching Writing that Counts in Urban Schools
urgency cannot be more immediate. Schools cannot be allowed to train students to be silenced or, like Tony, to feel enslaved. Educators cannot allow more students of color to believe that they really are worth less than their White counterparts.

CHAPTER 3

Developing Urban Youth Voice: A Framework for Culturally Responsive Classrooms

_Urban schools are not broken; they are doing exactly what they are designed to do._ (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 1)

On a cold, rainy Monday morning, I noticed Juan, a student who had all but dropped out of East Bay High, slip over the fence. Through our classroom window, I watched him toss his journal over the 7-foot-tall chain link fence, and then scale, pivot, and in one smooth motion, his feet hit the ground, he scooped up the journal, and within seconds was at our classroom door. He slid into an open desk as I glanced at the clock: 10 minutes left. He immediately began freewriting (the topic from the beginning of the class was still written on the board), and did not move again until after the bell rang. A few students greeted him as they left our room, and as I was packing up our class, putting our stack of journals into the box I used to carry our supplies, he finished his writing and asked me if we could talk. As students began to fill into the classroom (which would be used by its fifth teacher of the day), Juan and I settled onto a bench relatively hidden from others. As soon as his body touched the bench, Juan began:

_Chris, I’m so sorry I’ve been missing class. My brother was involved in a gang fight and our family has been forced out of our house. I ain’t got nowhere to go and I know I’ll be kicked out of this school for missing so much class. I know I wasn’t a good student before all this. But I want to ask if you will let me keep on writing, even if I am kicked out. I have been writing; I lost this journal a few times, but I keep finding it again, so I know I’m supposed to keep at it._

We talked for an hour, with Juan clarifying the continual threat of violence and homelessness, wondering what he could do to escape juvenile hall for missing so much school. As we strategized approaches to engage with his probation officer, I realized what Juan was actually asking. He wanted my permission to keep writing, to keep journaling, and he wanted my affirming feedback. Despite not caring about the rest of his education, Juan was learning how to
write for himself, and was developing a practice of using reflective writing to help make sense of his impossibly complicated, violent world.

Such intimacy and trust with a teacher has largely been lacking throughout urban student experiences, and yet such closeness is a precondition for instructors learning to respond to their students; if we do not know our students, how can we respond to them? If we do not create conditions for students like Juan to reach out, then we will not engage them. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify how developing voice can lead to classroom communities where students like Juan deepen their approaches to life. I demonstrate how I integrate the process of developing voice into classroom practice, and capture my attempts to model student-centered culturally responsive instructional approaches.

This chapter specifically focuses on how schools can create instructional loops with students, wherein students learn to speak aloud their experiences, listen to their peers, give feedback on each other’s work, and begin to educate others about the struggles they live within. As an educator, my role is to co-create the conditions through which students can develop and refine voice, then step back and allow students the space to express themselves as needed. In the classroom, this entails, at a minimum, structures that allow students the space to be themselves, but that are rigid enough to keep students moving forward, with concrete assignments and routines. I use personal at-home and in-class journals, punctuation-free papers, daily freewrites, cycles of reading to workshop writings, and a continual stream of exciting, passionate, relevant intellectual sparks, including poetry, music, novels, short stories, films, documentaries, but also live voice-filled poets, musicians, and artists to incite students to write.

Self-recognition and Examination

Maricella was a student in a high school class that I was co-teaching with an English teacher. Maricella had not turned in the first few assignments, and this troubled my co-teacher, who had thought she would do really well in the class because of her prior academic performance in the school. I met with Maricella a month into the course, and she was shaking with nervousness as we sat down to chat. After a few minutes of small talk, Maricella burst out: “I just don’t know who I am. Everything in this class asks me to write about who I am, but I don’t know.” I remained silent as I listened to Maricella express her frustrations with being seen as a “good” student, but she had always felt she did not know what to say. “I know how to say things, that’s what those A’s mean. But teachers don’t ask me what I think ’cause I’m the good, quiet kid.” She continued, her voice trembling: “I never know what to think because I’ve never been allowed to talk about me.” Maricella clarified why she did not want to be seen as talking: “The students who talk—they talk about their problems. And see, they got in trouble. Every time. So why talk? Plus, who is going to listen to a little Mexicana Negrita?”

Because she had always done well in school, Maricella told me she never had anyone ask about how she was doing. She never felt like she developed opinions because she just kept quiet and did the assignments she was given. Yet Maricella had witnessed complicated, violent circumstances, like when her cousin was being beat by her uncle. When he said something to a school counselor, he was placed into a group home; she hadn’t seen him in the two years since. Her older sister was also arrested as an accomplice to murder when she was trying to explain to her teacher and counselor that she was forced into a gang. Her point was that she had lived through a lot and was only seen as successful because she had been able to hide these experiences from her teachers.

But now, in our class, she struggled because she really wanted to talk about her family, about how teachers silence her, and how few choices she has. “My parents don’t have papers, and I have to go to college to get a job and pay for them. I think I’ve never had a chance to stop and just think about what I want to be.” Our class became a chance for Maricella to learn how to speak aloud and develop her thoughts. But she needed support in overcoming her intense reluctance to write or speak. She did not think she had a voice, and she thought the role of school was to reinforce her silence. Maricella reminded us that we had to do a better job of setting the tone, of helping students be honest with themselves and their peers. A focus on self-recognition and self-examination requires students to be comfortable being uncomfortable, as they are being asked to confront personal fears (not just about speaking in public, but about being who they are). This means creating the conditions for students to be themselves, and we then set up space for one-on-one, outside-the-classroom discussions where students like Maricella could open up and talk about fears and frustrations.
Developing voice begins with a thorough examination and critical self-reflection on who the writer is as a person. Such centering on who we are requires, at a personal level, recognition of the pain that shapes how we navigate the world. This requires not only creating a classroom community of trust and respect, but also modeling how, as educators, we live with purpose and grace while also being transparent about the tremendous burdens we carry. Key to developing such trust is developing what bell hooks (1994) argues is a commitment to “insist that everyone’s presence is acknowledged” (p. 8). In my classrooms, I try to create an environment where all students are valued for who they are, and that means that students have a responsibility to express their languages, cultures, and insights. Such expression is particularly important in an anti-immigrant, anti-ethnic studies political environment, where students of color face a barrage of English-only laws, and mandatory reporting that limits capacity to trust educators with intimate details. Such a context of oppressing children of color led me to encourage Maricella, and it was precisely my insistence on recognizing her that led to her realization that because societal pressures wanted her silent, she had a responsibility to speak. She soon wanted other students to develop voice, and reached out to reluctant peers helping, as she told them, “to free yourselves from the racism we are taught.” A few weeks after our chat, she read her paper to our class and invited three additional students into our class, all of whom were identified by Maricella as “silenced.”

While I create opportunities for students to write about how they experience the world, the point is to also get students to write with passion, to undo the damage from previous educators who have silenced through White, English-Only educational notions. That means letting students free in their words, and encouraging them to capture pieces of who they are that have often been silenced. In addition, educators must help undo the damage previous English teachers might have enforced, such as a focus on structures without ensuring students develop something to say; students of color often internalize their failure rather than question that the way they are being taught might be the problem (DeMeulenaere, 2009; Fordham & Ogba, 1986; Gibson & Ogba, 1991; Steele & Aronson, 1995). A central aspect of developing voice is affirming in students that what they actually think is valid, and our role is to help them say what they think more clearly, and to push on depth of thought. Because this work is intensely personal, I do not require students to share aloud everything they write, but I do require all students to write, and all students are expected to share their voices at some point. I also set the tone for students, modeling that while writing about our pain is difficult, speaking aloud this pain in public is even more difficult. I am clear

to students: speaking voice aloud is partially what enables us to learn how to feel and walk with more dignity in the world.

Setting the Context: Instructor Modeling

All of this framing requires that I be present to what has shaped me, to the very things that have silenced my own voice. I cannot do this work without developing trust throughout the modeling process, and this includes showing students how I examine my own context, edit my work, and learn to express myself. I am intentionally transparent about my personal work to learn about who I am and where I teach. I begin classes by sharing my own critical voice and what led me to teach that particular course, in that particular school, and in that particular community. I continually process my upbringing, my educational experiences, my pain, and the details from my life that have taught me to be an educator. And this very personal work is exactly what teacher education programs do not teach, is exactly what brings me closest to my students; this is what educators are taught to not share with our students. Without having the support of educational institutions, educators have to learn to process who we are and how we have come to be with others. And we have to demonstrate to students that we have developed a sustained community of people around us. This is difficult work, not seen as relevant to teaching, and yet is exactly what fuels my capacity to teach in student-centered ways. In short, if I do not know myself, I cannot help students learn to develop voice.

**Shared in-class freewrite**

Last week we talked of rape and molestation
in academic settings not meant to be meaningful
After class my office filled with women raped molested beat down
always by men and now I think of my father
the only male influence in my life
beating down my mother
16 stitches across her chin
beating down my brother
our baseball football and soccer coaches
public humiliation nothing compared to his fists splattering against
my chest my face my arms
these are the 7 fingers he broke 7 different times
the only thing saving me most days
are the very words you listen to now
and the hope that speaking out up and on
will move each of us to live how we need

I thus come into the classroom with a developed sense of self, in which I try to be both pro-student and deeply anti-oppressive. I write about my experiences as a student, teacher, and faculty member, but also as a violently abused child. I show my students my writings, which they critique and challenge so they can see me as also trying to learn, also trying to shape the realities I live in. Being known is a precursor to knowing students; I cannot expect them to share details of their lives if I do not share who I am. And I do not try to compare my wounds. Instead, I share who I am, what has impacted me, and what I do with my lessons (and subsequent issues). In this way, I do work prior to the class that informs how I think about my life, and this continual work informs what I do in classrooms.

Who I am also frames how much work I need to do to learn about my students before planning out a course. Because I am male, I know that I need to build up working knowledge about sexism and how my own male privilege affords me opportunity to speak. Because I am White, I know that I need to build up working knowledge about urban communities, especially the community in which the students I will be teaching live in (Howard, 1999; McIntyre, 1997). Before the class begins, I research the community, gaining a general idea of wealth, employment status, and the educational background of local adults. I look into incarceration rates and examine how prisons might impact students growing up. I look at incidents of police brutality and violence rates against residents in that community. I do background work on local community advocates and try to identify historical figures that played a role in civil rights struggles. Most of this is available online, and all of this I do prior to reaching into local resources.

Armed with basic demographic knowledge of the community, I reach out to local community leaders. I call or stop by local churches and service providers (including social workers, probation officers, HIV counselors), and stop by a local food bank to have an idea of who is being served and what kinds of food they are being served. While some of these interactions lay a foundation for me to later invite experts into the classroom, many simply provide a deeper understanding of the context in which my students live. Such community voices shape content areas that I might prioritize in class, such as a lack of local grocery stores, abnormally high HIV infection rates, and a lack of mental health services. Knowing about communities before teaching builds bridges to local resources that might not be connected to school, all while highlighting community voice for students.

Excerpt from Shantel's letter to me

...This, Chris, is my point:
My previous teachers have molded me into quietness
have smashed my mind to where
everything I think I know is wrong and
everything you told me makes sense but I didn't want to hear you
and was able to shut you out until three weeks ago
when you came to my house and met my grandmother
and brought that social worker
you hafta know that the 12 before her were wack mean punked my grandmother
disrespect you showed me was colonial
and you taught me learning
is the best respect we can give
you taught me that there are more out there
like me like you like the speakers in our class like the poets like the guitaristas
there are always people learning and
I want to be one of them
one of us
the ones who know who we are

Then I dive into the school itself, chatting with counselors, teachers, custodial staff, parents, and district personnel, trying to understand what people think of the school, the staff, and the students. Such conversations directly inform my understanding of previous curricula, histories, and recent local politics. This is particularly enlightening in underfunded, low-performing, and/or alternative schools that are designed to serve low-income students of color so that I can identify potential curricular gaps that limit student knowledge and writing preparation (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Knaus, 2007). In short, I invest significant time and energy prior to teaching to prepare myself for the specific school. I research the context of the school in which I am to teach as a way of setting the stage for my curriculum and teaching approaches. This is especially important, as I will be pushing students to document their realities, and they will know if I am unprepared to deal with these realities: thus, I tap into the resources that can support me and students, but also gain an understanding of what living in the community feels like prior to urging students to capture what they feel like.

With a basic understanding of the local neighborhood and resident resources, I tap into a larger community of experts to inform and expand the curriculum. I reach out to other area educators, artists, poets, musicians, comedians, playwrights, and chefs, looking to see who might be available to
come and speak to the class during the term. I plan ahead to identify experts I can call on to potentially bring them into my larger framed curriculum. This previous work positions me as a practitioner instructor; when I come into class knowing about the context these students struggle in and the resources they may benefit from, students see how I have prepared. This shows that I am humble enough to still want to learn, that I use what I learn to inform what I do, and that I know a bit about the context within which they live. This is essential; urban students often complain about not having educators who know them, who know their realities and understand some of what they live through (Delpit, 2006; Goldstein, 2007; Wynegaard, 2007). This drive to learn is precisely what I am trying to teach and model for students and precisely what is key to developing voice: being humble is required to continually frame ourselves as learners who reach out because we simply cannot know everything we need to.

The key to setting up classrooms that center students, student voice, and student realities is transparent educators who practice what we preach (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1973; hooks, 1994; Krishnamurti, 1953). This means listening to students so that we know enough about them to shift our curriculum and teaching to reflect their needs. My goal is to help students make sense of the power of their voice, and that means I must demonstrate such power. If the goal is to help students tap into their own experiences, to help arm them with personal tools to transform their experiences into power that informs their efforts to shape the world, then educators have to model how to do that. That means making sense of the oppression we have lived (and take part in). In essence, I set up outside-the-classroom structures to help me reflect on how I have grown up on my own, navigating through less-than-stellar K–12 schools, through college, and through emotional trauma and structural silencing. All of this directly informs how I set up my classroom, and informs my work prior to stepping into class on the first day. This is an important clarification: caring, responsive curriculum and teaching approaches are still limited by my own capacity to reflect on and address race, gender, and class-based privileges that shape everything I do within (and outside of) a classroom (hooks, 1994). This is particularly important as a straight White man; I cannot know what life is like as a young person of color, as a queer youth, or even growing up poor in today’s world, but I can learn as much as I can, and develop a team to support me.

The First Day of Class at East Bay High School

Prior to students arriving for their first class at East Bay High School, I write “Who Are You?” on the board. I sit in a desk, watch students settle into the same desks as far away from me as possible. A few minutes after the bell rings, students look around a bit bewildered: who is this teacher and why is he not in front of the class? After a few minutes of letting students talk to each other, discomfort begins to show as they glance nervously towards me, waiting for me to begin class. Just as students start to get up and walk around, I stand up. The class becomes quiet, and I ask students if they think I know more than they do about everything. They laugh dismissively. I keep asking until a dialogue begins: some note that I am the teacher and that they have to listen to me in order to pass the class; others say I probably do know more than they. I ask if they think I know more about race and racism than they do, and students emphatically reply “no.” “Then why,” I counter, “Are you waiting for me to start a writing class in an urban school? And deeper, why are you all sitting in rows of desks facing the front of the class, as if I have all the answers?” A discussion erupts as students talk about their frustrations with school. They talk about how they have to learn to be quiet. One student, Sherise, notes that students are graded by how well they “shut up and listen to the teacher.” I tell students that this class will be different if, and only if, students in this class are different. I tell students that if they take themselves and this class seriously, then we can shift the dynamics by designing the class as they wish. I stop the discussion and tell everyone to move desks how they want to be arranged.

At this point, I bring the now-sitting-in-a-circle class’ attention to the board, pass out new journals, and lay out freewriting ground rules: continual writing, no worries about grammar, spelling, or getting it “right.” I state multiple times that the point is to continually write, so the pen or pencil is always moving. I tell students to push beyond their names, urging them to show us how they think of themselves. “Set a context for how you want this class to be,” I urge, before joining students to write for five minutes about the question on the board (“Who are you?”). I continually remind students to write and not talk, not text, not do anything other than write. After five minutes, we share what we wrote as an introduction to the class, and despite initial hesitations and discomfort, everyone shares. Below are three introductions shared aloud that day:

Enrique Intro:

_Yo Soy Enrique and I am in este clase porque I haifa be_

Jasmine Intro:

_Alive today I am Jasmine and_
_I am here to tell you I matter_
I am from Moms and Pops
but Pops passed and Moms is
hardly here and I have two younger
sisters I take care of them and
I think you'll all know me soon enough
because I am here to say
something.

Marco Intro:
been rappin with style
when others lay tile
I am the ghost of my pahnas
layin low they been taken
and I still fakin tryin to stay alive
when my body be shakin
gots lots ta say just be listenen
cause I drop truths like home runs to babe ruths

As we shared introductions, the above examples stood out because of their vibrancy, rhythmic flow, and language. While students clapped loudly after Marco's poetic introduction, his content did not tell the class much about who he is, though we can assume he's known friends that were killed. Enrique, though brief, demonstrated that he speaks English and Spanish and was not particularly excited about being in the class. Jasmine, in contrast, got several quieter claps, despite that she shared several details about her life. But it was only the first day, and students were not yet focused on purpose, meaning, or voice: instead the default purpose is either to make other students laugh or to sound "smooth." Thus, students on the first day save their reactions for peers who read their words with the most energy. Meanwhile, I take notes during student read alouds, recording students who read powerfully, have sharp words, are nervous, are trying to say something meaningful, or who are trying to avoid sharing much, and those who are generating laughter.

Because I work in urban schools with huge ranges in abilities to read and write, there are also corresponding disparities between comfort levels in public speaking. I often work with students who have only a rudimentary foundation of writing, and I strongly encourage them to read aloud to help come to terms with why they have not been taught to read or write very well. Some students have refused to read, and I work one-on-one with them until they are comfortable sharing in front of the class. Most students, at least at the outset, share relatively boring introductions, with several class poets and clowns serving as obvious exceptions. A more typical intro is one by James, written in a juvenile facility in 2008: "I am James, still lost up." In the class at East Bay High, perhaps a third of the students introduced themselves with something similar, stating their name and sharing one additional, not-very-revealing line.

The dynamic of the classroom, shifted slightly by the alteration of the classroom chairs, our discussion of school issues, and students sharing with each other, moves even further when I share my writing last. Students do not expect me to share, but particularly nothing engaging or powerful. While I freewrite a new version for each course, here is the intro I wrote and shared for Jasmine, Marco, and Enrique's class:

Chris' Intro:

Christopher Bodenheim Knaus 1
born into dad's punches
welfare lunches and teacher hunches
everyone assumed I cheated on tests
couldn't be smart this poor white kid
no one knew my grandmother was
a social worker in watts
fled nazi germany at 17
or that my mom was kicked out of
8th grade, 4 kids by 21, divorced and on
her own by 24 and I
told I'd fail every day I
flanked 7th grade
never gave up even as my rage
burned bridges at every turn
and still burning I
fighting so that each of you
stand on your own words
powerful, alone and exactly
what and who and how you and I need to be:
Christopher Bodenheim Knaus 1
honored to be with you all
ready to learn and grow and push and move
and move
and move
and be moved.
As soon as I finish reading, students erupt into excited hoots and hollers, likely exacerbated by their surprise. Students call out: “Teacher can kick!” “Step back, Chris is about to flow” and “Who’s teacher’s a poet!” I ask students how they feel about this process of starting off the year. “I feel like we could be a family,” one student remarks, while another argues that, “we already shared more in this class than we have all last year in all of our classes.” A few students are notably quiet and have muted responses, and I jot down their names so I can follow up later if they are not more engaged within the next few days. I let the class out on a high note; students are generally excited at the notion of building up a community around sharing their own voices.

On the second day, I lay out the course syllabus. When I first began teaching, I used ground rules from June Jordan’s Poetry for the People, but I have since learned to guide students in the development of their rules. I provide ground rules only for our freewriting process, and then ask the students to develop additional ground rules for ensuring students will feel comfortable reading aloud their work, and will honor what each student says. Students develop a list, write it up creatively on posterboard, and I post these laminated ground rules in front of the class. I remind students that while I will hold each student accountable for the agreed-to rules, it is their responsibility to maintain these rules, and I will also hold them accountable for holding each other accountable. Within a few weeks, students generally begin to take charge of the classroom, stopping someone mid-sentence when they challenge a peer too harshly, or dismiss someone’s attempt at writing.

**Ground Rules**
*(adapted from June Jordan’s Poetry for the People)*

1. We consciously respect each other
2. We foster in ourselves and each other an ability to craft our messages for others to contemplate
3. Expression is an art of telling the truth
4. We are the community
5. Writing is how we connect
6. We are responsible for what we say and how we say it just as we are responsible for helping others craft writings through critical feedback

**Writing Assignments: Self-recognition and Examination**

As we begin the second week, I frame the rest of the major assignments, and focus on the first paper. This paper extends the class intro read aloud. Sample extended prompts have included: “This is how I live Racism,” “Capture what your voice sounds like,” and “Here I Am, Listen.” At East Bay High, the class completed a draft of a “What You Need to Know About Me” paper at the end of the second week. A complete draft was due the following week, and students had to read the three-page paper aloud and turn in at least three sets of peer feedback. I demonstrate how we begin the feedback process later in this chapter, and more extensively in Chapter Four, but these first few weeks focus more on writing than providing feedback. “You have to learn to write before you can learn to edit,” I tell my students.

**What You Need to Know About Me**

This assignment has three purposes:

1. Introduce yourself to the class in a way that dramatically extends beyond your intro read aloud
2. Help develop your capacity to clarify, in public, who you are in a voice that reflects who you are
3. Push beyond your notion of standardized writing to see that you can write powerfully

Thus, there are two rules:

1. This paper is to be written and spoken in your voice
2. No punctuation or standardized writing structures of any kind are allowed

This paper is expected to be the equivalent of approximately 3 pages, and should be well edited to capture your points in vibrant language. Avoid any vague terms (it, good, nice, interesting, etc.), and speak with purpose and passion. As with all assignments in this class, the more effort and energy you put in, the more you will get out. This paper will be read aloud in class. This paper is non-graded; there will be no credit given unless the paper is read aloud, is free from punctuation, and includes three edited drafts from peers.

To help scaffold the “What You Need to Know About Me” assignment, I asked several students to share aloud “Where I Am From” poems (Lyon, 1999), which they had written the previous year in their English class. While students appreciated their flow, there was general consensus that the poems were vague and did not tell nearly as much as did the introductory read alouds. Students were ready to push beyond what is typically written for other courses, but many expressed that they did not know how to do that in creative ways that demonstrated their voice. We continued freewriting with prompts to help stimulate ideas to write about, and I provided a different poem each day that demonstrated voice. In addition, I played several hip-
Reflection on Context

After setting ground rules on the second day, we review the syllabus and lay out a bare-bones curriculum. I typically begin a high school class with a no-more-than-two-page syllabus with course expectations, an overview of key assignments, and due dates. This syllabus clarifies two key course goals that can be integrated into other content areas: 1) Students will develop their voice as a tool to capture and make sense of racism and urban life, and 2) Students will express their voice in forums that make sense to them. The point, to which I return throughout the rest of the class, is that students are living reporters: most mainstream news perpetuates urban stereotypes of violence, drugs, gangs, and low test scores, and students know the community better than mass-media reporters, and often their teachers. Their role, as framed by the syllabus, is to become the types of reporters we need, the sort that stay alive because they have to report on what is happening through their unique voices and insights. Thus, students expect that we will shift readings, assignments, and strategies to respond to what comes out of their writings.

Introduction to the Syllabus

1. **Course Overview**

This course is designed to develop your intellectual and personal voice. Using critical writing, film, and creative expression, we will analyze identity, oppression, and the use of voice as a way of working toward our definitions of social justice. As high school students, our role is to develop our voice, our understanding of who we are, how we fit within society, and our tools of expression, so that we become more articulate about the social issues we care most about. Two core questions that we will return to throughout the course will guide us: What do I, personally, have to say? And How do I say it?

2. **Course Expectations**

Every member of our course community is expected to deeply engage, participate, challenge our self and others, learn, critique, express, and ultimately develop our voices. We each come as experts in our own experience, with our own voices, insight, and unique perspectives. Our entire classroom community is expected to be open, supportive, and critical of how we express ourselves and how we assist our peers in expressing themselves.
After spending the first third of the class helping students wrestle with and document the pieces of their identity that make them who they are, I shift focus to examine personal context. I remind students of the point they already made: very little of their schooling is framed on urban realities, and I tell students that in speaking their realities, in the everyday voices they speak and listen to, they honor their communities and begin to document their communities. Capturing and preserving local, cultural, and linguistic knowledge is a skill, I state over and over again, and we are going to practice that skill until we become adept at sharing who we are and where we come from and what moves us with whatever audiences we think need to hear us. This entails guiding student assignments and thoughts around the immediate world in which they live, encouraging them to capture the social conditions that shape their lives, including what literally surrounds them on a daily level (including family, community, school, but also violence, racism, sexism, abuse, drug use, food, housing conditions). When done well, students capture their everyday realities, and with support, learn to see writing as a tool to capture the ugly and beauty of their world, but also as a means of demonstrating who they are, and what they survive. This is how students reclaim their identities and begin to see school as useful. For when students see a purpose in writing, they can tap into what they need to say, and ensure words reflect their lives.

Depending on the course length, I select two to five core texts, which I use as a foundation for discussions around voice, language, and reporting about our personal realities. I have used Sapphire’s (1996) Push, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman’s (1996) Our America, James Baldwin’s (1962) The Fire Next Time, June Jordan’s (2000) Soldier, and Jamaica Kincaid’s (1988) A Small Place, among dozens of others. I purposefully choose nonfiction and fiction that offers direct insight into the author while demonstrating voice that reflects the authors’ language and personal cultural context. Our America, for example, reflects two young African American students talking about what living in low-income urban Chicago looks like. The authors, who spoke their text through voice recorders, capture their daily life, narrating what they see in their neighborhood, complete with interviews of family members, educators, and neighbors. Photos that provide concrete imagery accompany the book. Such texts also show students that people just like them write and publish books.

My America by Shantel
LeAlan and Lloyd tell me what they see on the bus so listen to my never seems to end bus ride because I too have a voice and I too have something that no one seems to want to hear
Mr. Bus Driver puts my ass as I squeeze past
He never seems to care that the 75c I pay mean I am younger than his daughter
I sit down next to an old man with drool on his chin
Clutch my bag and hope I get off this bus
But my stop aint for 25 minutes
35 if cars litter Oakland streets or if these girls act like the bitches the rappers
behind me be rappin about
I don’t like that the words they say about me come out of my mouth
These girls telling the bus driver this stop this stop even though they never get off
Those open doors just hang empty in the west Oakland wind
Bringing the same cancer my mom died from
I see men my age hangin on the corner with 40’s in their hands
Brown sacks don’t hide them they should be with me on the way to school
Too cool they just wait for some life to take hold
Instead the police finger two blocks down our bus flies passed
Boarded up houses
Just like the one I live in with my 3 cousins 2 aunties one uncle and way too many “friends” who like to creep into our room or sell us the weed they sell to the addicts on the corner that looks just like the one we ride by almost every morning the police arrest kids my age who should be in school
But at 8 am they head towards another day in jail
I am on the way to school
And Mr. Bus Driver puts my ass as I squeeze past.

Our America contrasts with A Small Place, which students appreciated because Kincaid’s writing, as Jasmine argued: “helps me see that I can write using standards and still show how fuck, I mean how many standards there are.” Rather than narrated from a personal perspective, Kincaid shows colonization from a national perspective, and uses details often known by those who live in the context of the colonized. Many urban students, quick to dismiss formal writing structures, often find Kincaid’s work useful to see that the issue they have is not with formal writing structures. Instead, her work helps students see the racism that shapes how educators uphold formal writing structures. After reading A Small Place, Jasmine argued that there should not be “one true correct way to write that just so happens to be the way White people talk.” I thus use a combination of books to show that there are multiple types of
reporting and reporters, and all can be engaging and well written, while showing how racism works.

The rest of the course is rooted in student perspectives, energy, and decisions. I continually affirm student effort in writing, and just as continually urge students to express themselves more deeply, more in the language they use daily, with friends, and at home. How we communicate about the things we care about becomes the focal point for both the curriculum and my instructional techniques. I center the ways in which students talk and communicate on a daily basis as a way to deepen their writing and to honor the ways they frame ideas (Gay, 2000; Lynch, 2006). I tell students I will hold them accountable, and that they need to hold each other accountable, for what their words literally mean. I then demonstrate how their words can mean something other than they intend, and that they must be responsible for their clarity. We examine offensive terms used to degrade people of color, women, people with disabilities, and dissect our daily language for the historical roots of oppression in words, and students attempt to shape the languages they have previously felt oppressed by. One particularly powerful exercise is a discussion to generate a list of everyday words with oppressive roots (such as “gypsy” or “gipped,” “red-handed,” “ghetto,” “peon,” but also what many educators refer to as the “N-word,” to name but a few). The sheer impact of filling up every whiteboard or chalkboard in the room within just a few minutes reminds students of the powerful negative impact our words have.

In reclaiming affirming language, students begin to take more responsibility for the words they use. But beyond being more purposeful about word choice and what we say, I expect students to shape daily agendas, writing assignments, and classroom dialogue (Knaus, 2009; Stovall, 2006b). My role, which I make clear throughout the course, is to ensure students are continually writing, continually editing, always pushing deeper to communicate what they see and feel, and to ensure they respect each other and themselves in our shared space. In essence, my role becomes a drive to ensure students are getting what they say would bring them to school. Collectively, this means striving to say what we mean with as much passion as we can, and then critiquing to ensure our purpose is conveyed well. In this way, students begin to frame themselves as reporters capturing the reality they live but rarely see reflected in traditional school curriculum.

Freewriting

Perhaps what most marks my voice-focused courses is the daily freewrites; much of our time throughout the year is spent freewriting about our daily context. Sherise talked about my classes like this: “Chris be havin’ us writing every-dang-day!” Almost every time I run into a former writing student, the first thing they’ll tell me about is how they still freewrite in journals. I recently ran into a former student who was relatively disengaged throughout our course. He had just walked down a block that I had taken his entire class through during a neighborhood freewrite four years earlier. With his memory spured, he purchased a journal so that he could get back into freewriting. Our chance meeting just a few days later reminded him of the imperative to keep on writing, and reminded me how freewriting sticks with students years later. Even with the students who do not write daily during class.

My typical writing courses begin each week by checking in about the previous week’s work, and each day begins with 5–10 minutes of freewrite, followed by a chance for volunteers to read aloud what they just wrote. Within a few weeks, most students begin freewriting on their own, writing phrases or topics on the board as a prompt to guide their classmates’ writings. I hold fast to my freewriting rules: continual writing about the topic or where ever your mind takes you. Once we begin, the pen is constantly moving and there is no self-editing, no worries about grammar, spelling, or punctuation, and no stopping to think about what you want to say (and what you will not say). I push hard on students who come into class not on task; I continually assert that the five or ten minutes are exclusively for writing. This is when I am most harsh on discipline: there is no talking, no sharing, and no texting; nothing except the quiet scratch of handwriting. The point is to write about what is on your mind, what you are struggling through, or what you need to get out of your system. And I restate this whenever students need reminders.

While there are dozens of examples of potential freewrite ideas available in writing resource books (Behn, 1992; Berdan et al., 2006; Goldberg, 1986; Muller et al., 1995; Tannenbaum & Bush, 2005), the vast majority of writing prompts come from listening to students, having them bring in ideas, and from feedback that sparked further writing. Some days we focus on close writing assignments,
with students capturing feelings, items, and experiences in thick, descriptive details (Muller et al., 1995; Tannenbaum & Bush, 2005). Other days students write about a highly charged topic at the forefront of many students’ minds (such as recent police brutality or a drug bust that resulted in a student being arrested). Some days I play a short film clip to spark ideas, other times, a song, and occasionally, I’d temporarily place snacks students were eating in the middle of the room to spark topics on texture, taste, and smell. If we had a guest speaker, the speaker might initiate the freewrite. Mostly, however, after the first few weeks, students initiate the bulk of the topics. By the end of the term, many students fill their in-class journals with daily writings, and I provide a new journal for each completed journal. As an additional incentive, I remind students to freewrite about papers they need to develop for other courses.

I occasionally use extended or linked freewrites to help students expand upon previous ideas. One particular musician-centered exercise helped deepen a class notion of how to ensure the flow of writing enhances emotion. I played a song for students to freewrite with, capturing what they hear, feel, see directly in response to the song. This method is commonly known as “found poetry,” where students write down words, phrases from a piece and then later edit their own notes into a poetic response to the original piece (Dunning & Stafford, 1992). The song the students wrote to was, Tozeza, a soft yet upbeat tune typical of Oliver Mtukudzi and the Black Spirits (2004). The students wrote about how the music took them to the Caribbean, to the beach, and how the song seemed happy, yet was also building up importance as the song went on. They liked the rhythm of the call and response throughout the song. I told them the song was by Mtukudzi, from Zimbabwe, and we talked about how little we know of Africa, which might explain the guesses of Caribbean or how urban youth might correlate African music to being on holiday at the beach.

The next day, I played a video of the same song (Mtukudzi, 2006). In the video, we see a man hard at work chopping down huge trees. The backdrop is of Mtukudzi singing and dancing, yet somehow somber looking amidst a forest. Meanwhile, the man works tirelessly, his muscles bulging through his sweat soaked skin. The video shifts to a woman the man comes home to; she serves him food, but rejects him when he pulls her towards him. He beats her for rejecting his sexual advances; all the while we see a young child watching from under a table, hiding and afraid. The video transposes to trees being chopped down, and in the final scene, the boy is crying as he watches the woman we assume is his mother being pulled away from him: she is holding a finger in front of her lips, urging him into silence.

The class mirrors this silence and we freewrite for ten minutes. The students barely contain themselves, and when I tell them to stop writing, students burst out that while the song seemed upbeat, it really was not. They are conflicted about the meaning they previously attributed to the song and what they now recognize the song is about. We dive into a discussion about tempo and rhythm, and how to convey a message forward ensuring your words are conveying what you want them to. Several students note that the song seemed hopeful, that in hindsight, the upbeat tempo actually helped them think of the song as hope that the child will end the cycle of violence. Many students excitedly jot down notes about how they can read aloud their work more rhythmically, but also how they can write in ways that capture hope. The conversation about violence against women and children lingers. Students raise this just before the bell rings, and we pick up the conversation the following class when a student writes the words “parent abuse” on the board to kick start the day’s freewrite. We spend the next two weeks focusing on family violence, child abuse, and domestic violence, all stemming from freewrites about a song and accompanying video.

Another example of the power of freewriting to engage students in conversation about what they live occurred during a class at Central High School. Several students heard that a fight was going on in front of the school, and word spread immediately to all students; the excitement in the room made editing peer papers impossible. As several students rushed out of the room to watch the fight, the rest of the students looked around confused. While most wanted to watch the fight, they did not want to leave our room, and we had already talked about avoiding violence by not rushing into it. A student stood up, marched up to the board, and wrote, “Capture what you feel right now.” The student-initiated freewrite topic was relevant, and tapped directly into the heat of the moment; students began to write furiously. When the students who ran out of the room came back in, they already knew what to do, and despite their heaving breaths, began to write. Many of those freewrites became the foundation for poems that students later read at a district-wide student convening on youth violence.

This is the importance of continual, everyday writing; students develop their craft while engaging in conversation about the very issues they see around them, but often do not have a language to talk about. Providing
numerous forums to reflect and then to share with peers allows students to frame a dialogue they have largely been kept from through standardized curriculum. Yet these are the very skills students need to develop if they are to arm themselves with skills to negotiate this increasingly violent world. Continual freewriting helps build up foundations for such conversations, but also helps prepare students for dialogue around issues that are risky to bring up without some sort of structure. Having students write prior to discussing potentially traumatic issues helps ensure students have the time and space to reflect and then speak. Freewriting thus becomes the backbone of a voice-centered class, bridging the academic structures that often limit voice with the need for students to make sense of the world around them. Freewriting becomes a tool through which students capture their daily reality, and students begin to freewrite in cafés, on the bus, at parks, on street corners, and in bathroom stalls as they hide away to record their thoughts and emotions.

**Writing Assignments: Reflection on Context**

Depending on the length of the course, I usually assign two or three assignments to clarify personal experiences with racism, such as a paper based on interviews with local elders or a letter to a newspaper advocating for a local urban issue. Drafts are due in advance of deadlines, and students are required to provide critical feedback to each other (and to turn in feedback they have received and addressed in their final drafts). The course ends with student performances of the final paper and with letters to an adult of the student’s choosing. Throughout the course, topics loosely follow themes from the readings, music, film, and guest speakers, adapting according to student writings. I focus on quick writing exercises, capturing details, eliminating passive voice from our vocabulary, and creating the maximum impact with a minimum of words.

In a class at East Bay High School, one assignment designed to encourage students to detail their context, and then reflect on what those details mean was a paper framed around an incident that happened during class. A student at the school was placed into a forced mental health facility because, as one student had said, “she just went ka-razy.” Several students in the class were close with the student and asked for help in supporting her while she was detained in the mental health facility. The two-part assignment documented issues that make children “go crazy,” including, a bullet point list of up to 50 examples from the local neighborhood, and the second part was an up-close expansion of one of those issues. The lists of examples included police brutality, dismissive teachers and administrators, violence amongst peers, watching parents get beat, and watching parents beat other people, homelessness, lack of quality food, and addictions (to drugs, alcohol, violence, porn, and gambling).

Students were continually checking in with each other about how they experienced most of these painful circumstances firsthand, and then they shared the exact details they expanded upon to ensure others felt they captured enough to make the reader “go crazy.” This was one of the students’ favorite assignments because they were able to rely upon peers to identify issues, and, as Angela shared, “they got to talk about what hurt in a safe way, with a friend they could trust.” She continued: “That was how we got to know each other, and our class was so tight after, cause we felt each other.”

### Assignments to Capture Student Reflection

1. **Responsive freewrites:**
   a. Neighborhood walks. At least once per week, students walk around the local community, and at random stops, do 5–10 minutes of freewriting to capture local neighborhood details. These help students learn to capture concrete details, while documenting aspects of their communities they often do not notice.
   b. On-spot writing about tense issues. Throughout the class, tense discussions emerge, often about racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression. In the beginning of the year, I often stop students in the midst of a heated conversation, and urge them to freewrite for 5–10 minutes on a perspective that is valid, but not being heard. Within a few weeks or months, students begin to stop conversations on their own for freewriting to help clarify complexities.
   c. Textured Close Observations. Once per week, students freewrite a textured, close detail-filled capturing of a small object or area. Students might be asked to write an entire page about a broken yo-yo, an ice cream cone on the sidewalk, a crack along a wall, or someone’s shoe. The point is to narrowly focus on detail to sharpen capturing skills.

2. **Longer assignments:**
   a. Capture Your Block. This 4–5 page paper, which can also be read aloud in class, provides a comprehensive portrait of every building on the block that the student lives on. The focus remains on concrete details to show the condition of the buildings, the state of repairs, the depth of potholes and the amount and type of plants, trees, cars, and how trash is disposed of.
   b. Where You Buy Food. This 4–5 page paper captures the 3–4 closest stores and marks the distance to the nearest full-service grocery store. Students are required to interview nearby shop owners, assess for fresh produce, and provide an overview of what is primarily sold at each store, including overviews of what sort of food is marketed in which ways to which customers.
   c. Driving Through Your Community: What the Police See. This 5–6 page paper captures the neighborhood through the perspective of local police, and includes either a ride-along with an officer or a drive with a school security or resource officer. The assignment includes interviewing the officer, probing for specific details the officer is trained to notice and respond to, and then an analysis of what the officer was not noticing.
Personal Responses to Our Context

After setting a foundation for student writing that vacillates between capturing who students are, and the world they live within, I urge students to begin writing about concrete survival strategies. This is where students begin to merge the first two sets of exercises, expanding upon previous writings and thinking about who they are and what the world around them looks like. Here I shift writing exercises to guide students to reflect on how they respond to the world, literally prompting students: “Given the racism you already captured, what are your personal strategies for survival? And how is this working?” Writings include critical recognition of the ways individuals respond to their personal contexts, and include concrete capturing of what students do every day to survive. This is where I also focus on capturing emotional responses, including anger, pain, fear, love, and safety. But there is no guarantee that students writing about these issues will be rewarded by other educators.

What I have learned is this: No matter how well I speak, my words will be used to show how I am not like my peers. White people will use me to show how I am not like these other niggers. And now I write to show that we are all the same: articulate, powerful, and young. We live in their racist world, so now I have to write because my life, because our lives, depend on my words. Even if they twist our words against us, we must still write.—Shantel

Shantel names the central problem with developing urban student voice: no matter how well students of color speak, they will often be disregarded because of their fashion, their styles, the tone of their diction, their race, gender, poverty, and youth. And even if Shantel is “heard,” she will often be framed as being better than her peers, as an exception to the rule, as articulate despite her surroundings. And because of this reality, because urban students of color are simply not afforded the same opportunities that more privileged students are, I center curriculum around racism so that students of color develop an understanding of and language about the structures of racism that they know intimately. While students capture the intricacies of racism in their daily writings and in their papers, they share such work as a way of informing each other about the realities they live. Focusing on racism so intensely also allows students to detail what they do in response to the racism they capture.

A powerful example of students teaching each other about race and racism came from student assignments that directly capture how students live racism. At Central High, two students who had previously fought each other during what they had called a “race war” in their school came together in our class. I paired them up knowing they had been violent towards each other, and urged them to capture how they are seen individually and collectively by the world. David, a tattoo-covered Latino who had been in and out of juvenile hall for his gang-related activities, wrote about how everyone assumed he was stupid and violent, despite his love of playing the acoustic guitar and his desire to take care of his mother and father. Robert was also in and out of juvenile facilities, a young African American man who never got the chance to play basketball though his 6’4” frame and athleticism likely could have provided him with a college scholarship. He had intense rage at how he saw his family treated by White police and had a thick distrust of White people and teachers. After initial resistance to working together, David and Robert read each other’s papers. I set up a meeting with the two of them to talk through feedback, concerned that they did not have the tools to listen to each other, despite what I perceived as similar growing up contexts. Getting them to start talking was difficult, but after they began to share, I became irrelevant, sitting back to take in the beauty of two young men of color who have been taught to hate each other bond over their shared stereotypical treatment. They wrote a powerful collaborative paper about how their White teachers were constantly afraid of them, and four years later, still reach out to me letting me know how they are friends, aligned in their commitment to addressing racism against young African American and Latino gang-affiliated men.

Centering racism in the curriculum encourages and allows for the dialogue that David and Robert needed to validate each other, to see each other as human and as being treated in similar ways. Students continually make connections to understanding racism as a system that silences critical challenge and that makes their voices ever so essential. My point in centering racism is to help students of color see that just as their White peers normalize racism, so too do students of color. We do this through our daily writing and sharing, but also through creative assignments: Students show how “normal” racism is through freewrites and sometimes, through creating 4-minute documentaries or through interviews with elders about what today’s racism looks like. Creating racism-focused assignments helps students dive into racism while still being able to maintain their own voice (and thoughts)
around race. The focus also enables students to illuminate their own survival strategies, enabling them to talk through what they do to navigate racism, and how effective their strategies appear to be.

Students of color often find the purposeful centering of voices of color to be inclusive and empowering, yet White teachers often ask if I am excluding the few White students by doing such. One White student clarified the tension of focusing on racism, and on centering the experiences of people of color: “I always feel welcome in this class, even though I don’t have much to say about racism. But its good, I get to learn a lot, and I realize that [White] people like me are never quiet enough to hear what racism is.” I encourage such dialogue in the class, and urge students to wrestle with why I chose which readings, and with my focus on prioritizing authors of color who speak clearly about racism. Most White students have had tremendous exposure to White authors; few students of color have been exposed to many authors of color, much less authors that speak directly to the pervasiveness of racism. For most students, this will be the only class they will ever take that only has readings by authors of color. Regardless of who is in the class, and what I might want to assign, the key for me is in acknowledging everyone’s presence, being transparent about what sorts of authors I assign, and not allowing the conversation to shift away from racism. Even as I facilitate in such a way to center the racism we all live, I still strive to respond to student needs, no matter how well planned out a curriculum may be.

An opportunity to shift the curriculum and course focus came midway through a high school writing course in 2004, when school-wide rumors spread about several students who had been recently diagnosed with HIV. We were in the midst of creating documentary film shorts about local community leaders when the class erupted into a physical fight; one student had called a student with HIV a “fag.” While I had known of this student’s HIV status, he had not disclosed it to the class, and now everyone correctly assumed that this was one of the students with HIV through the context of another student’s homophobia. The student who initiated the fight was immediately expelled from the district (he had numerous prior offenses), and the rest of the class had a week-long discussion about how we support students who are being marginalized, particularly when it is around something life-threatening like HIV. The class ultimately bonded over the incident, and wanted to increasingly understand both homophobia in the black community and the prevalence of HIV amongst people of color. I asked the class if we should shift our focus to these two issues or maintain our focus on our already-in-progress projects. The class unanimously decided to merge the focus and continued the interviews they had begun, but shifted the focus to homophobia and HIV within the black community. I reorganized the class, identified relevant readings, film clips, and guest speakers, and aligned additional assignments to focus on our new topics. The course concluded with a school-wide forum on HIV within the black community, whereby the students presented the findings from their interviews and brought in guest speakers to educate the school. Student papers documented how their collective response informed their individual strategies to address racism.

Even the student who was expelled was invited back to the classroom to offer an apology. Despite the fact that the student was not allowed back on campus, I was able to negotiate bringing him to campus (with his parole officer, two police officers, and the school principal) for one class period, during which the student broke down, asked for forgiveness, and disclosed that his mother died of AIDS-related complications (which he had not known at the time of the fight he initiated). The class wrote a collective letter to his parole officer, formally accepting his apology and testifying to his growth and humility in a powerful display of forgiveness and recognition of responsibility for peers. While that student has not yet attained his G.E.D., he regularly reaches out to several of the students from the class (they became friends after he was expelled from the school). Despite living as a young adult in poverty, he regularly volunteers at an HIV clinic, and speaks to the importance of a class he was kicked out of.

For me, the importance of that class was the lesson that no matter how invested I am as an instructor in course content, I must remain flexible so that I can support student needs. Student-generated topics should shape the class, and while I might begin with a curriculum framework, I build into the curriculum space for students to guide content, topics, readings, films, and writing assignments. No matter how essential a topic is to me, I do not own the curriculum. I am reminded, when I listen to students, that the purpose of a curriculum is to foster student thought, action, and voice development. So when students speak to a greater, more pressing need, I shift with them, integrating the lessons I was trying to teach with what they ask for. This is based entirely on my capacity to create the conditions for voice, and to step out of the way, facilitating based on what students say, write, or share so that they recognize their experiences are shaping what they learn, how they learn, and what role I take as the formal instructor. And this is precisely how I create the conditions for students to explain their responses to what they see as racism.

Peer Feedback to Focus Voice

Throughout my shifting of the curriculum to reflect student need, I continually center racism through editing. I set a foundation from the first days of the
course so that students recognize that part of racism in schools means their work is typically ignored by teachers. This is demonstrated through educators who pass students of color despite the fact that these students might not yet have developed the capacity to read and write (Howerton & Thomas, 2004; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). As a way of dealing with this institutional racism, I remind students that they have to help each other develop because schools are not often invested in their intellectual development outside of standardized tests. In addition, while students like Lupe, a multiracial Black, Latino, and White junior at Central High, might state that, “I don’t like school because it’s racist,” I use editing as an opportunity to push her to clarify vague terms like “racism.” Most everyone, I argue, is against racism generally. But when students get detailed, capture the concrete feelings that racism creates, and highlight the ways in which racism manifests, they move beyond terms and metaphors to reality. So I push Lupe to clarify what she means by “racist” and she eventually, with help from peers, comes up with this: “My white teachers tell me what learning means. They tell me that to know means to speak like them. And to be successful means to act like them.” Lupe continued: “But they don’t act ‘right,’ they act white.” Her observation is critical; Lupe sees that how her teachers teach requires her to be what she frames as “White” which would mean denying her Black and Latino heritages.

The importance of students clarifying what racism actually means, looks like, and feels like is essential in schools that do not acknowledge or teach about what critical race scholars term ‘racial microaggressions,’ the dozens of seemingly minor acts of racism that people of color face throughout the day (Allen, 2010; Pierce, 1974; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The notion of racial microaggressions reflects critical race theory’s assertion that racism occurs everyday to people of color, and I urge students to identify the racism they face each and every day. Editing becomes the academic lever to help students clarify reality in more concrete terms, and so just after setting up the practice of in-and-outside the classroom freewriting, I set up the notion that writers need to continually refine our words to ensure our voices are heard in the ways we would like to be heard. One component of this clarity is to push beyond blanket terms (such as racism and oppression) that lead to White defensiveness. This requires intense, personal editing to ensure what is written actually reflects what the author intends, including aligning with the tone, language, and details that clarify personality and presence. Julia remarked that when she edits, she does so in order to ensure that “White people cannot tell me what I am saying didn’t happen, and if I say it was racism, they get all denial-like. But when I break down racism, and don’t even use the word, then they get all mad for me—instead of at me.” Julia captures here the process of turning words on the page into “voice,” what poets often call “workshopping poems.” This editing is the bulk of the “academic” work in my classes, where students learn to spend time crafting their words, learn to ensure they are saying what they want to, in ways that reflect who they are but also maximize the potential to be heard by the intended audience.

Going back to Jasmine, Marco, and Enrique’s introductory writings, I frame the second week to push beyond the excitement of voice. By then, as is typical, the class is back in rows, and I ask why students are waiting for me to tell them what they need to know again. Some students grumble, then move desks into a circle so that we facing each other again. The culture of resistance to students taking over the class is something that I confront continually over the first few weeks. Even as students excitedly challenge how most of their schooling has silenced them, they slip back into their roles as subservient students. This becomes my continual push, arguing that students have to take space if they want to shape classrooms, schools, and communities. If students wish to develop their voices, I argue, then they have to claim our classroom dynamics. They have to make this space what they want it to be, despite not having formal training or experience being in classrooms that value their voices or perspectives.

I ask the class to freewrite for five minutes about the first week, and several volunteers read aloud their insights. A few students share their excitement and hope that the class will keep being real. I make a point to stop the class after each student who describe the class as “interesting,” “great,” “okay” or even “freakin’ fabulous.” “These are very vague words,” I press, “be clear what is interesting,” what specifically is ‘great,’ and what ‘freakin’ fabulous’ actually means to you. Do not assume we know what you feel—show us with your words.” Students begin to express frustration at me jumping in, and I argue that clarity of our words about what we think and feel is our collective point, and vague words will not get us there. Vague words, I often say, will not shift society. Eventually, after everyone has read, several students speak up that they appreciate me challenging them because they agree, vague words are everywhere. The class falls into a discussion about how we are taught in English classes, and then reinforced in all other writing assignments, to write passively, to not say anything concretely for fear of being told we are wrong.

I tell students to bring out their introductions from the first day and read them in pairs, with each partner asking clarifying questions or responding as appropriate. They do this for ten minutes, and then I ask for a brave volunteer to help deepen our class commitment to voice. Jasmine volunteers and writes her own introduction on the board. I ask her if she is ready to have her work dissected in public, and she reaffirms that she is. In just the
second week of class, I begin to demonstrate how our words are often vague, and while a particular set of words might get applause, the words might not mean all that much. Jasmine reads aloud her poem twice; the first time I ask students to listen. The second time I urge Jasmine to slow down, to read in her “normal” voice, and to help us listen to her. I tell the other students to jot down any line that sticks out because it is fabulous or because the line is not working. After students complete their notes, I guide the class in collectively analyzing the poem, going word-by-word and line-by-line.

We start with Jasmine’s first line: *Alive today I am Jasmine*. The class loves the line, notes the reference to being alive when so many young people they know are killed. I point out that Jasmine tells us who she is after telling us she’s alive, and students reply that being alive is the most important thing given the daily violence they face. Several students appreciate how “today” tells them that she may not expect to be alive tomorrow. That leads perfectly, they argue, into the second line: *I am here to tell you I matter*. I agree with students but ask them to clarify how that line works, and for the first time in the class, there is total silence. One student notes the importance of stating why she is here, and students start talking about what it means to matter. I ask the class to whom Jasmine matters, and they all agree: while she sounded like she meant to herself, they also thought she meant they had to think she mattered, too. Students dissected this line into hearing Jasmine issue a directive, as Marco argued: “Jasmine told me straight up she matters. She didn’t give me no option to think she don’t.”

At this point, the students are engaged in breaking down the meaning of each line, and eagerly shift to the third line without my prompting. “*I am from Moms and Pops*” immediately becomes a problem. The students do not like it and do not have a language to critique without stating that they do not like it. Juan captures the class sentiment: “It just don’t do nothing.” I push them to clarify why and one student retorts: “Duh, we all from moms and pops.” I step us back and note that not all of us know our birth parents, and ask “how many of us were raised by aunts, uncles, and grandparents.” A show of hands indicates two thirds of the students were raised by a range of relatives, neighbors, and adoptive parents. They conclude: the line is too vague. I ask them to think about what this line adds and where the line moves us from the previous forceful directive and they agree that the line is not needed. We talk for a few minutes about the importance of having meaning in each word, in each line, and not wasting words. I remind them of June Jordan’s (in Muller et al., 1995) notion of maximum impact with minimal words and then students start to resist, complaining that I am too focused on meaning and that I care too much about each word. I have gone too far, they argue, but then a few students jump in, clarifying that we are helping Jasmine’s piece get even better. Jasmine agrees that this process is helpful, and urges the class to continue: “Ya’ll have no idea! This is helping me think about where to go next. I can write a whole paper from all this stuff!” She continues, cautioning: “But can ya’ll take it easy on me? Dang! I can’t wait to tear your stuff up!” The class erupts into laughter.

Jasmine Original Intro

*Alive today I am Jasmine and I am here to tell you I matter*
*I am from Moms and Pops but Pops passed and Moms is hardly here and I have two younger sisters I take care of them and I think you’ll all know me soon enough because I am here to say something*

Jasmine Revised Intro

*Alive today I am Jasmine and I am here to tell you I matter I am from torn sheets and bullet riddles streets too much sugar and ribs and 40’s and Pops passed too much wine and diabetes and tricks and Moms is hardly here and though barely raised I raise two others 6 am I wake Bobbie and Senti, hurry them into the shower Unfold the clothes I washed last night pick their day’s outfits I rush quick oats into the microwave into their mouths I put the homework I made them do last night into their packs with quick-made sandwiches, apples, granola bars, and cheetos because I am here to say even if I don’t matter to you I matter to me I matter to Bobbie I matter to Senti and if I don’t matter to you I am here to say I should because I am their future I am you are we are in the same streets and will only be beautiful together Alive today I am Jasmine and I am here to tell you I matter*
We continue to examine the next few lines, pushing Jasmine for more detail. We stop again at “I take care of them” when students ask specifically what Jasmine does. After a few vague starts (“I clean up, I wash up, I make dinner”) students guide Jasmine into creating a quick list, which, after some minor editing, ends up on her revision. The last line splits the class: half of the class likes how Jasmine tells us she is here to say something, but the other half is confused. “Why not just tell us what you want to say,” they ask Jasmine. She ultimately agrees, and in her revision, tells more about who she is and how she lives. And that is the point in writing with voice: saying what you want to say in a voice so clearly, so powerfully that your intended audience can hear and feel your point. Jasmine’s example is typical; most students revise their intros to say more about who they are, and excitedly share details about their lives that they do not share with most of their friends.

The second week ends with students presenting their revised intro read alouds, after spending a few days providing feedback to each other in pairs. When pairs get stuck, they come up to the front of the class, write the troublesome lines on the board and lead the class in soliciting feedback. The point is to get used to starting the class with freewrites, to provide and receive feedback, to ask for individual and collective help from peers, and to get into the practice of continually editing. This helps everyone become more comfortable expressing oneself in public. A shift begins at this point, when students start to share their work in public, and become responsible for honest feedback to each other. They’ve never done this before, and while it feels scary at first, within a few days, most students are eager to get feedback from peers. There are always exceptions; the impact of being silenced by peers, teachers, and other adults has shut down many students and some need additional support to open up. I meet one-on-one with those who are most uncomfortable and resistant, and usually after a short discussion or my offer to provide feedback prior to sharing with the rest of the class, students dive in.

Writing Assignments: Personal Responses to Student Context

There are countless examples of assignments that help students examine how they respond to the context of racism they live within. I often have students respond directly to a poem, song, or short video clip that demonstrates racism in a quick, concise way. I have used dozens of poets, including Audre Lorde, Ai, Chrystos, June Jordan, Sherman Alexie, Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, Patricia Spears Jones, Rita Dove, Assoto Saint, Ana Castillo, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Justin Chin, Haunani-Kay Trask, augmented by a dozen poetry compilations. I also use books and writing excerpts from James Baldwin, Richard Wright, June Jordan,
spected by society, and then juxtapose that with historical analyses of legal
disrespect of low-income communities of color. In essence, I blend what they
tell me they need with curriculum content that deepens their understanding of
the issues they write about and ways they can respond to increase their
chances at meaningful survival.

*Found Poetic Response to Chrystos' They’re Always Telling Me I’m Too Angry*
*by Christina*

For every person who is quiet
There are dozens of us dying
We bleed their racism
While they tell us This Is Not Blood

Angry that I cannot walk down the street without someone being afraid
Angry that I cannot speak in class without a white student saying I talked over
them

Angry that I cannot feel human without some white man saying I am in their way

Angry that welfare line is as big as my hunger

Angry that when I say its always about racism some white person makes me tell
him what “it” means when “it” means EVERYTHING!

Angry that health care is a battle because white people don’t seem to mind war
with me

Angry that my dad is in prison for what white people do on Saturdays, Mondays,
and Wednesdays

Angry that everywhere and everyhow and all the time there is racism
Seeping into my pores so that I sometimes think
I should be afraid of Samoans or Laotians or Croatians

So Damn Angry that I sometimes say bitch or ho or whore when I’m referring to
my people

So So So So impossibly angry that I sometimes am exactly the problem

Angry that I sometimes believe what they say about me so that I say
What they say about me

Angry Angry Angry but thankfully
I can breathe on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays because we
have this class the one place where racism is Not Okay

The one place where I am
The one place where my sisters and brothers
Are allowed to be as angry as me.

Assignment to Capture Student Responses

1. Creative freewrites:
   a. Senses of Racism. In this introductory writing, students freewrite responses
to my intermittent prompts of “Racism sounds like..., Racism tastes like..., Racism
looks like..., Racism smells like..., Racism feels like...”
   b. Another word for Racism is....In this freewrite, I encourage students to
come up with a list of words that explain what racism is without using the
words “race” or “racism.” The key is that this list has to be compelling and
clear to someone who lives in the distant future.
   c. Race is What? In this recurring freewrite, students define race as it looks in
the room they are currently in. We begin this freewrite in our class, but
move to different locations throughout the course, including a grocery
store, a homeless shelter, and walking through the neighborhood.

2. Longer assignments:
   a. Capturing Racism. This paper explores what racism looks like from the
author’s perspective, and encourages the writer to capture, using descriptive
analysis, what racism feels like without using the word. Given your
capturing, what do you do to not internalize racism?
   b. Racism in the Media. In this paper, students compare and contrast two
different sources of media, including, for example, one corporate media
source such as CNN, Fox News, MTV, and BET, and one independent me-
dia source or locally produced musician or radio broadcast. The purpose is
to explore what each media source is saying about racism and what the au-
thor does to inform herself about the nature of racism.
   c. Interviewing Racism. This paper combines research with analysis of racism,
and is based on students interviewing elders within the community about
how they have seen racism changing over the years. Students then compile
the interviews into a paper, analyzing themes and providing a comparative
perspective of racism today.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a framework for educators to develop, strengthen, and
reflect on their own approaches to teaching voice to urban youth. Through
capturing stories, experiences, and background context to my personal
approaches, I attempt to clarify flexible, responsive, and transparent instruc-
tional approaches that encourage students to be themselves, to understand
racism and oppression, and begin to develop and find strength in using their
voice to challenge what they see as injustice. Because teaching for voice
means modeling our voices, demonstrating others who use voice as a
profession, and setting up continual writing about the world we live in, assignments allow students the space to write what they need to. Educator techniques that center on freewriting and providing intense feedback and that align classroom management to the purpose of developing voice provide needed structure. The purpose of voice-centered courses is to develop voice through examining personal identity and the larger social context, and then through examining responses to the larger context of racism. This examination is based upon capturing student reality and moving audiences with critical expression. Thus, I try to center student realities, to tap into what motivates students, and to help students express what they would like to change about their immediate world. And in the end, the effectiveness is based entirely upon educator passion; the extent to which students blossom is largely a reflection of the extent to which educators decenter silencing factors that are the norm in most classrooms and schools.

Final Assignment: Letter to my Professor by Shay

Dear Chris:

I feel that this class has helped me express myself better with my words. I’ve learned how to speak what’s on my mind, instead of bottling me all inside. I once thought I used to give too much detail when I spoke. But I’ve learned that the more I speak with detail others can feel what I feel. This class has helped me get ready for the world’s criticism. It has also helped me get a better mindset on how others feel and what they go through. That I’m not the only one struggling in this cold-hearted world.

Chris – Thank you for pushing me when I wanted to just sit back and be lazy. You’ve seen the words that are stuck in my mind and left on the tip of my tongue. You kept pushing when I couldn’t push myself any more, when I wanted class and this school and this world to just be gone. Thanks for helping me express myself. I’ve always had trouble with that but I feel very confident now that I’ve been in this class. It was your helping hand that helped me get on that stage to read my poem to all these unknown people. As I clung to the paper and my voice got shaky I remember the love and support from our class and kept on reading. Your voice kept me reading. Thanks for helping me speak out instead of speaking in.

Interlude I

Youth Radio: Celebrating Survival through Developing Voice

Emma Shaw Crane

Writer and activist Arundhati Roy (2004) argued that, “There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” Radio is a tool to strengthen and validate those who are deliberately silenced and preferably unheard: youth of color, prisoners, continuation high school students, survivors of abuse, poor people. During the semester-long class at East Bay High, I worked with students to record a CD of their work. My intention in recording E-High students was to honor the stories and affirm the voices of young people kicked out of school, locked up, on welfare, labeled “emotionally disturbed” and shut down by teachers, social workers, and probation officers who treat them as problems to be reformed or disciplined.

My commitment to amplify the voices and stories of marginalized people, and my belief in youth radio as a tool to do that was born when I heard my own voice recorded as a teenager. I realized that despite seven years of daily abuse, I was still alive and able to speak for myself. I was not, as I had been repeatedly told by an abusive coach, stupid or worthless. The experience of listening to my poem, recorded and amplified outside myself in a room full of people, affirmed that I still had my voice, wounded and terrified, but my own. The supportive and empathetic responses of those who listened affirmed my experience: my precious and necessary ability to love and protect myself had been taken from me and that was not my fault. That moment deepened my capacity to love and defend myself, and opened up a space for my rage: at my coach, at my parents for their failure to protect me, at myself for lying to protect my abuser, at the teachers who looked away. Listening to my voice, I saw myself: wounded but fiercely and completely alive.