



November 2022

Theo Huxtable Becomes a Historian: Culturally Relevant, Disciplinary Writing in the Secondary Social Studies Classroom

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Recommended Citation

McMurtry, Teaira PhD (2022) "Theo Huxtable Becomes a Historian: Culturally Relevant, Disciplinary Writing in the Secondary Social Studies Classroom," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 84: No. 1, Article 1.

Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol84/iss1/1

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Illinois Council of Social Studies

Excerpt 1

Context of scene: High school junior, Theo, comes home from school and sadly reports to his family that he got a C on his history paper.

Theo: I got a history paper back today. A "C." I couldn't believe it. I thought I would at least get a "B." Mr. Pierce said I can do the paper over again and try for a higher grade.

The transcribed excerpt above comes from a classic family sitcom from the 1980s called "The Cosby Show" (Knott, 1987). The excerpt features 11th grader Theodore "Theo" Huxtable who laments to his parents and his maternal and paternal grandparents that he received the grade of a "C" on his paper about a crucial Civil Rights event, The March on Washington (see Attachment A for dictated paper). Theo believes his written research should have been awarded an "A" until he had dinner with his family and realized that their oral recounting of being at the historical event was "everything" he needed to write a well-researched history paper on "The March". While there is some truth to his epiphanic sentiment, Theo's growth from a facts memorizer and reporter to a historical inquirer and thinker as the episode advances demonstrates a literacy problem and a promising solution that has been documented for the last several decades: (1) two-thirds of U.S. adolescent population are not proficient in writing according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment (Graham, 2019), and (2) many students have difficulties with historical writing because they see history as fixed rather than interpretive and with the complexities of the writing process itself (Monte-Sano, 2010).

Throughout this article, I will use transcribed excerpts (like the one above) from “The Cosby Show” episode, “The March” (Knott, 1987) to highlight several points: (1) the need for disciplinary teaching, learning, and literacy in history, namely historical thinking and writing skills (2) the opportunity for students to construct meaning understandings about historical events from people and their stories as primary sources by creating oral histories (Nokes, 2013) so that students can “...communicate original accounts of past events, place those accounts in a larger context, and reflect their own learning” (Lattimer, 2014, p. 63), particularly of social justice movements in the U.S., and (3) the need for students of social studies to capture authentic language use of the people and how language is used to shape social movements. In this article, the African Verbal Tradition (AVT) will be discussed in relation to how participants tell stories of Black social movements in the U.S.

The Perpetual (But Solvable) Writing Problem in Secondary Classrooms

While this episode from “The Cosby Show” premiered over three decades ago, the writing problem in U.S. middle and high school classrooms it conveys is still prevalent today. Adolescent students, like Theo, loathe school writing and are typically assigned writing versus taught the art of composing (NWP & Nagin, 2006).

A key reason why students are not writing at proficient levels is due, in part, to the lack of writing instruction and practice they receive at middle and high school classrooms (Graham, 2019). According to secondary writing scholars (e.g., Graham & Perin, 2007; Lattimer 2014; Graham, 2019) a few key aspects of good, general writing instruction (i.e., the art of composing) includes:

- establishing clear, realistic goals for writing;

- modeling writing acts (i.e., talking through thinking, problem-posing, revisions, and decisions for style, choice of words, and structure);
- devoting in-class time for composing opportunities (including talking about writing);
- allowing for frequent short and sustained writing opportunities for real audiences--which go beyond a "...grade-driven transaction between a teacher and students" (Lattimer, 2014, p. 62)--for authentic purposes, different types of writing (e.g., free-writes, journal writing, extended analytic and interpretive papers) and of multiple text types/genres (e.g., expository, persuasive, etc.);
- explicit teaching of the writing process (planning, revising, conferencing, etc.);
- orchestrating interactive or collaborative writing opportunities; and
- using digital tools for writing.

While these are effective and necessary methods to teach writing *across* subject areas (for skills such as comprehending content), there are unique literacy skills (i.e., thinking and writing) that are required *within* each academic discipline. As emphasized by the National Council of Social Studies and the C3 Framework (College, Career, and Civic Life) (NCSS; 2013), students in the social studies discipline must be able to gather and evaluate a variety of sources and strategically use evidence to strengthen claims in their writing (hence document-based questions). Students must not only be explicitly taught basic literacy skills (e.g., identifying an author's purpose and main idea, etc.), and the literacy skills of each discipline, but also the art of navigating between unique discipline-specific literacy demands throughout their K-12 years for civic life, and their success in K-12 and beyond.

Disciplinary Literacy in Social Studies

Disciplinary Literacy (DL, henceforth) is built on the premise that each academic subject area or discipline has a discourse community with its own language, texts, and ways of knowing, thinking, and communicating within that discipline (O'Brien, Moje, & Stewart, 200; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Not only does it consist of subject-specific reading and writing practices, but DL also provides ways of understanding and thinking about texts, and creating and communicating knowledge and texts (Cullen, 2016). Hence, each discipline has specific demands for writing. Unlike the discipline of science where technical and concise writing that aims for correctness and avoids "overclaiming" are characteristic (Lent, 2016), students of social studies must be able to construct an argument, make claims, and situate a topic within a historical context to produce an evidence-based interpretation (Greene, 1994; Monte-Sano, 2010). Since historians represent historical reasoning and thinking skills through written text, historical writing cannot and should not be left to the English Language Arts (ELA) teacher to teach (Wineberg, 2001), for ELA is its own discipline with a culture of unique literacy practices that ideally favor elaboration and craft. In fact, many students who write history papers erroneously write from an ELA tradition, which has typically been geared toward standardized test writing and not on inquiry and problem-solving (Applebee & Langer, 2013; Lent, 2014). Hence, the formula for an ELA paper is to write a thesis--toward the end of the first paragraph-- and support the thesis with evidence. The demands for an evidence-based historical paper require different skills and processes, which prioritize the use of varied sources.

Scholars of DL in history (i.e., Wineburg, 1991; Greene, 1994; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2013; Nokes, 2013) agree that there are at least three historical literacy skills (thinking and writing) that are unique to the discipline and that must be explicitly taught to students: (1) *sourcing*, which is possessing authorial awareness, citing sources, and considering perspective and bias; (2) contextualizing, which is situating sources within the time and location of their creation and making sense of casual relationships (3) corroboration, which is making sense of a variety of sources from multiple perspectives and acknowledging counter-evidence . Excerpt 2 below illustrates how Theo lacks the skill of corroboration.

Excerpt 2

Context of scene: *After Theo reads his paper, his family begins to question his credibility.*

Claire (Theo's mother): How many books did you read?

Theo: One! It's called *The Pocket Guide to American History*. (laughter from family ensues)

Cliff (Theo's father): How many pages did it have about "The March"?

Theo: One. But there was a little bit on the top of the next page.

Claire: So this is a condensed version of historical events.

Theo: Right.

As noted earlier in this article, in tandem with the writing problem, the excerpt also presents another persistent academic conundrum among U.S. high school students: they tend to view history topically or as a static account of chronological events in which they can glean from only one source of interpretation; they don't see a need for evidence because to them, history is fixed and not evidentiary and interpretive. Thus, a single source suffices (Wineburg, 1991; Monte-Sano, 2010) because to them, writing about history is all about knowledge sharing.

Another issue this excerpt highlights is the issue that the traditional use of textbooks can promote. Nokes (2013) notes research that has documented how the traditional use of textbooks, which are often sourceless, authoritative and seemingly objective, and do not encourage critical historical habits of mind, such as skepticism, making connections, critique. In fact, "...textbooks often portray claims, theories, and even uncertainties as historical facts [...] that students [...] accept without question" (Nokes, 2013, p. 139). Because of this, Theo's uncritical consumption of the textbook's presentation of historical events is by design.

Lastly, there is an important layer that Theo misses: his oblivion to direct access to familial key witnesses and primary sources. As Nokes and De La Paz (2018) acknowledge that students must learn to look at the past rhetorically rather than topically. Storytelling, is both a key characteristic of historical argument (Nokes and De La Paz, 2018) and a crucial element of the African Verbal Tradition (Smitherman, 1977; Williams-Farrier, 2016).

Criteria for Historical Writing

In an inaugural attempt to examine trends in how adolescents use documents to represent history in their evidence-based historical writing, Monte-Sano (2010) drew upon the insights into the historical thinking and writing of historians and philosophers of history and thereafter analyzed 56 document-based questions (DBQ) essay responses written by 11th-grade high school juniors. The five characteristics of evidence-based historical writing are *factual and Interpretive accuracy, persuasiveness of evidence, sourcing of evidence, corroboration of evidence, and contextualization of evidence*. The characteristics are listed and described in Table 1.

Table 1

Benchmarks for Evidence and Indicators of Historical Writing in Students' Essays
(Monte-Sano, 2010)

Characteristics	Benchmarks (description of characteristic)	Criteria Not Met	Criteria Met (proficient) Indicators	Criteria Exceed ed
Factual and Interpretive accuracy	The essay interprets the documentary evidence accurately--appropriate interpretation. Fair representation of people, issues, and events as opposed to misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Factual details and chronology are also accurate.		Got the facts straight (e.g. chronology of events, which countries were allies or enemies). Comprehended the information in the documents they used. Interpreted documents historically, noting subtext and context.	
Persuasiveness of evidence	The essay substantiates the claim with evidence that is compelling, relevant, significant, and specific. The weight of the evidence is sufficient--even compelling. The evidence provided is relevant to the claim--clearly connects to the main point. The selected evidence is historically significant rather than marginally related. Evidence is convincing to the reader.		Incorporated evidence to support the claim. Selected specific evidence that included precise historical details or quotations from documents. Selected relevant evidence that related to the argument. Selected evidence that was historical significant, given the topic. Integrated multiple pieces of evidence in support of the claim.	
Sourcing of evidence	The essay notes authors of documents or other sources of		Made reference to documents or cited documents that were	

	evidence used to make the argument. The use of evidence recognizes bias inherent in sources cited. Evidence is balanced and credible.		<p>relevant to the argument.</p> <p>Recognized or referred to the authors of the documents cited.</p> <p>Attributed authorship to the corrected-- recognized that a person who was discussed in a document was not always the author.</p> <p>Recognized biases of authors or commented on credibility of evidence.</p>	
Corroboration of evidence	The claim responds to and accounts for the available evidence. The essay synthesizes multiple pieces of evidence that work together to support the claim. The essay explains how different pieces of evidence work together to support the claim. The essay recognizes and addresses conflicting/counterevidence.		<p>Recognized where documents might support their claim.</p> <p>Used more than one document to support their claim.</p> <p>Recognized and responded to counter-evidence.</p>	
Contextualization of evidence	Contextual knowledge is used to situate and evaluate the evidence available. In contextualizing evidence and topic, the essay recognizes historical perspectives and demonstrates an understanding of causation. The essay uses sources in a		<p>Established the historical context and perspectives relevant to the topic.</p> <p>Established clear, correct cause-and-effect relationships.</p> <p>Established correct chronology.</p> <p>Connected excerpts of</p>	

	<p>manner that is consistent with the contemporary meaning of the sources for the original audience at the time and place of their creation.</p>		<p>the document to their historical context--or, grounded and situated documents in their original context.</p> <p>Used documents in a manner that was consistent with their original, historical meaning.</p>	
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Evidence Supporting Theo's "C"

Excerpt 4

Context of scene: *With his paper in hand, Theo has just come downstairs to the living room where his family awaits the reading of the contested C-level paper, entitled "The March".*

Theo: Here it is! Ready? (Theo begins to read.) *"On August 28, 1963, there was a Civil Rights March in Washington D.C. Two hundred and fifty thousand people were there. Many people gave speeches. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave the famous speech, 'I Have a Dream.' It was an important day for America."*

What do you think?

Cliff (Theo's father): That's it?

Theo: No, that's just the first paragraph. What do you think so far?

Paternal grandfather: Well, you have your facts straight.

Theo: I know! Can you believe Mr. Pierce gave me a "C"? Does this sound like a "C" to you, grandpa?

...

Claire (Theo's mother): Theo, maybe your teacher wanted something else?

Theo: Like what?

Claire: Well, honey, you could've written more about the people. You know, why they got involved and what they felt.

Until the end of the episode, Theo is baffled as to how he got a "C" on his history paper, "The March." The *Characteristics and Benchmarks for Evidence Use in Historical Writing* (Monte-Sano, 2010) writing rubric (see Table 1) used against Theo's writing,

reveals that while the grade of a C is legitimate; a lesser grade might have been more appropriate. As posited by Theo's paternal grandfather in the excerpt above and then later by his mother, Theo would have scored a proficient on the *Factual and Interpretive Accuracy* criterion on his essay. Albeit the source that Theo selected to use, "The Pocket Guide to American History" is neither a primary nor a secondary, but a tertiary source, Theo, according to the rubric indicators (and in the words of his paternal grandfather), "Got the facts straight [and]... [c]omprehended the information in the documents [he] used."

Theo is unsuccessful in meeting expectations in all other benchmarks of historical writing. Thus, his historical thinking and writing neglected to construct an argument, to select relevant evidence, to source, corroborate, and contextualize the pieces of evidence, and then to craft an interpretation. In fact, because his paper is evidence that he "transfer[ed] knowledge to the written text" (i.e., from The Pocket Guide onto his paper) versus constructing an argument and "crafting interpretations based on multiple documents" (Monte-Sano, 2010, p. 543), Theo probably did not consider his selected source as an interpretive document of evidence (Nokes 2013), but rather a single source of textbook-truth to support his ELA-esqe thesis statement, which reads: "[The Civil Rights March] was an important day for America." This demonstrates Wineburg's (2001) argument that students tend to elevate secondary and tertiary sources while avoiding primary sources.

As noted earlier in this article, the dual academic conundrum of understanding historical literacy and engaging in the writing process is soluble. Historical thinking and writing instruction (which is described at the end of this article) is key in moving students

from underperformance and basic literacy skill attainment to advanced literacy skills achievement and in enculturating them in the culture of the history discipline.

Culturally Relevant Disciplinary Literacy

Teaching history from a disciplinary perspective not only enhances students' historical thinking and writing skills by inviting students into the culture of history, but it also creates an avenue to teach social justice topics (i.e., Civil Rights Movements, Black Lives Matter Movement) in culturally relevant ways. That is, teachers can teach cultural-historical events through the cultures that initiated and experienced those events in ways that are relevant to students. According to Ladson-Billings (1994; 2009), culturally relevant teaching can be described as leveraging cultural referents to support students' social wellness and academic success, maintain their "cultural capital" (Yosso, 2005), and cultivate their socio-political consciousness. Literacy taught from a subject-specific perspective acknowledges that each discipline has its own discourse community, ways of thinking, reasoning, communicating, creating and disseminating text. Further, through DL, the idea of an "academic English" is expanded; there is not simply one academic English in which students must become proficient, there are several. Hence, a functional linguistics standpoint (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Lukin 2008) highlights that each discipline has its own vocabulary and grammar (i.e., patterns of language). This framing should be applied to the discourse communities of different cultures. Just as there are multiple ways of communicating academically, there are multiple Englishes that are germane to racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.; all are equally important and must be cultivated for survival. To illustrate, the African American culture, while not a monolith,

embodies and emanates a verbal tradition that is distinctly different from any other spoken language in the United States (i.e., Black Language or African Verbal Tradition).

The Language of the People

Every dialect, every language, is a way of thinking. To speak means to assume a culture. Frantz Fanon (1967)

Language and identity are inextricably tied. African Americans/Black Americans, particularly those who are descendants of enslaved Africans, possess a unique linguistic lineage that reflects a historical event in itself. While it is a legitimate linguistic system with well-documented rules for sentence arrangement (i.e., syntax or grammar), patterns of speaking and articulation (i.e., phonology), vocabulary and cultural idioms (i.e., semantics), social use of language (pragmatics), gestures and other non-verbal cues (i.e., paralinguistics), Black Language is seldom viewed as a complete language system. In fact, historically, it has been viewed as broken English spoken by uneducated Black people who are in low- and working-class positions.

To illustrate rules for the grammar of Black Language, take the following excerpt from “The Cosby Show episode”, “The March”, which are the lines that come after

Excerpt 2:

Excerpt 5

Cliff (Theo’s father): I can just imagine what they wrote about The Boston Tea Party. “Some men jumped up on a boat and there were some celebrities, and they threw the tea in the water and Sam Jones, John Havlicek and Bill Russell **been** winning the championship ever since.” (laughter from family ensues)

This *stressed been* construction (or the linguistic representation: *stressed bin*) is a unique grammatical technique that indicates the action started some time ago and is still going on in the present. Its standard equivalence would read “...they threw the tea in the

water and Sam Jones, John Havlicek and Bill Russell [have been] winning the championship ever since [and they are currently].” This nuanced speech act that Theo’s father, Cliff, utters is vital to this sentence spoken in this social context (i.e., familial setting) and could be missed by an observer or historian who has an untrained ear to hear Black Language. As indicated by his family who begins to laugh as Cliff ends his sentence, the *stressed bin* was intentionally employed with unconscious automaticity to communicate a specific meaning, to demonstrate ties to his community (i.e., immediate family and general African Americans culture), and for a comedic effect. That is to say, the participle “have” was not mindlessly “left off” in Cliff’s utterance.

While research has documented the legitimacy of Black Language for almost a century, myths, misconceptions, and mockery still permeate about its existence and essence, and thus about the Black bodies from which the language emanates. The dynamism of Black Language is also misguidedly mistaken as “slang” and often deduced to a checklist of an inaccurate description of features (i.e., missing -s’s and -ed’s, double negatives, and haphazard use and placement of the “be” verb). Ironically, comedian--and arguably African American cultural icon-- Bill Cosby, who played the character Cliff in “The Cosby Show” is noted for spewing denigrating commentary and disseminating mistruths about Black Language as “crap” during a speech entitled “The Pound Cake Speech” (2004), eight years after became a hot topic during the controversial 1996 Ebonics Case (see *Hooked on Ebonics*, 2005).

Black Language, however, extends beyond its rich grammatical patterns (i.e., regularized tense markers, multiple negation, and precise uses of the “be” verb), and those who utter its rhetorical richness articulate their way of being and existing in the

world, which was born out of what Smitherman (2000) refers to as the “African Holocaust in America”. Africanized ways of speaking in America through chattel enslavement was a vital tool for survival. It was a counter-language technique to outwit White enslavers. Enslaved Africans communicated plans for escape through “musicking” or the creation and spread of Negro Spirituals. Negro Spirituals are integral to the languaging of social justice movements today. For example, the Negro Spiritual, “We Shall Overcome” has been staple sounds of social uprisings following the murders of unarmed Black people, such as Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

In Excerpt 6, Theo’s maternal grandfather performs a legendary Civil War battle song, “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” with an embodiment and resonance that bears cultural resemblance to a Negro Spiritual.

Excerpt 6

Context of scene: *The end of the storytelling scene and episode*

Maternal Grandfather: Russell (Theo’s paternal grandfather), do you remember there was someone sitting way in the back of the bus starting to sing (starts to sing) “*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He’s trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He hath loosed the fateful lighting of this terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on.*”

There are also many beyond-the-surface cultural communicative acts (i.e., pragmatic, semantic, and paralinguistic aspects of language) that is evident in the following excerpt. Black Language scholars (i.e., Smitherman, 1986, 2000; Boutte, 2016; Williams-Farrier, 2016) refer to these Black modes of discourse as the African Verbal Tradition or AVT, which can be traced to West and Niger-Congo African language systems. In short, AVT consists of verbal strategies, including (but not limited to): *signifying, co-narration or overlapping talk, and call and responses/tonal semantics.*

Following Excerpt 7 are brief definitions of the verbal strategies along with examples of employment within the excerpt.

Excerpt 7 (continued from Excerpt 4)

Context of scene: *Family beings storytelling about their participation in “The March”*

1. **Maternal Grandmother (MGM):** I can tell you what [the people of The March] felt--hot!
2. **Claire:** (laughing): Yes, it was rather warm that day.
3. **MGF:** we were lucky; we were on an air-conditioned bus and all of them didn't--
4. **MGM:** --So many busses. Hundreds and hundreds of them.
5. **Paternal Grandmother (PGM):** And the singing--
6. **Claire (interruptingly):** --Yes! The singing; you could hear the singing coming from every bus. We sang all the way down there.
7. **PGM:** (in a whisper) Right.
8. **PGF:** Not everyone was singing.
9. **Cliff:** (rolls eyes) Please don't start on me.
10. **Claire:** You couldn't tell your father to keep quiet.
11. **PGF:** He had a tendency to drag out the words and sing off-key.
12. **Theo:** What really happened besides the heat and the singing?
13. **PGM:** Theo, I'll tell you what you should put in that paper. The mood of that day. Oh, Theo, it was so friendly--
14. **MGM:** --Yes, it was.
15. **MGF:** People we didn't know at all, waving to each other like they were old friends.
16. **PGF:** We were old friends by the time we walked from the parking lot to the Great Lawn. (some affirming head nods and an encouraging “yeah” from the co-storytellers)
17. **PGM:** It was a couple of miles at least.
18. **MGM:** We had to march to The March.
19. **PGF:** You saw all kinds of people. All colors. From every part of America.
20. **Claire:** They carried signs and buttons to let you know where they'd come from.
21. **Cliff:** I traded buttons with a man from Portland, Oregon.
22. **Claire:** Walked around all day long with that button on “Kiss me I'm Irish.” You can't stop there: Your father went around collecting buttons all day long. Every time I looked up he had a new button: “Kiss me; I'm Jewish” “Kiss me; I'm Polish”
23. **Claire and PGM (together):** “Kiss me, “I'm Japanese”
24. **Cliff:** And I still have those buttons upstairs.
25. **Claire:** Oh, we have a whole drawer full of reminders from that day.

26. **Theo:** It must have been great knowing you guys were going to be part of history.
27. (from several members in unison): Oh, no, no, no.
28. **PGM:** No, that wasn't what it was about. We were just expressing what we felt then--
29. **PGF:**--But when we stood outside of the church parking lot waiting to get on the bus--it was only about 50 of us then--I looked around and thought "Well, what if we're the only ones who show up"
30. **MGM:** We were a very small group of people.
31. **Claire:** --yes, till we got down there.
32. **MGM:** There were so many people.
33. **Claire:** To stand in front of the Washington Monument [sic] surrounded by 250,000 people (shakes head)--to be heard (family visibly, introspectively reminisces). See, Theo, that's the one thing that you can't get in the history books. That's the one thing that you can't capture: the people.
34. **Theo:** I guess so.
35. **MGM:** And you should have seen what it was when we went back to the buses.
36. **PGF:** Right, people held hands and smiled. There was a feeling of joy and pride and all the newspapers said there was gon' to be trouble, but there wasn't any. It was lovely. Peaceful.
37. **Claire:** It was peaceful. I still carry a little of that day with me.
38. **PGF:** Dr. King said and I don't think I'll ever forget: "In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check--(the family uses tonal semantics to express affirmation and encouragement)--when the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and The Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."
39. **Theo:** This is great; I didn't have to go to the library after all! All I had to do was have dinner with my family. Thanks!
40. **Cliff:** Hol- Hol- Hold on, wait, wait, wait one sec. Up in the bottom drawer of your mother's dresser, pictures, old newspaper clippings--
41. **Claire:** Your father's "kiss me" buttons are in there, too (laughter from family ensues)
42. **Theo:** Thanks! (heads upstairs).
43. **PGM:** I'm glad Theo had that paper to write. It brought back a lot of memories.
44. **PGF:** It certainly did.

Signifying

This rhetorical strategy is defined as “the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about [...] the listener [...]. It is a culturally approved method of talking about somebody – usually through verbal indirection” (Smitherman, 1986, p. 118-19). As seen in lines 8 - 11, Cliff’s father and Claire continuously poke fun at Cliff’s inept singing ability. In line 9, Cliff employs verbal indirection-- a nonverbal communicative act (rolling of his eyes)--to beg for mercy and bow out of participation.

Co-narrating or overlapping talk

The dashes in lines 3-6, 13-14, and 28-32 indicate a narration style in AVT wherein interruption of someone else’s utterance-in-flow is not only allowed but also desired. This co-narration or overlapping style among speakers aids in inciting and evoking memory, displays a collective, in-sync spirit to the audience, and paints a more complete picture of the event.

Call and Response

This African-derived communicative process, which takes roots in the Black Church can is defined as “...spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which the speaker’s statements (“calls”) are punctuated by expressions (“responses”) from the listener (Smitherman, 1986, p. 104). These responses could be repetitive phrases or sounds of affirmation (co-signing) and encouragement. Further, because the sound of what is being said is just as important as what is being said (Smitherman, 1986), African Americans draw on West African tone languages (musical strategies) to convey messages, such as *talk-singing*, *repetition*, and *alliterative wordplay*, *intonational contouring*, and *rhyme*. While call-and-

response and tonal semantics is better seen than read, these features can be observed throughout the storytelling event that is taking place in Excerpt 7, specifically in lines 16 and 38.

While historians (including adolescent students of social studies) must aim for historical accuracy, they must also commit to ensuring exactness in cultural representation when collecting the stories of the people. To do so, the authentic language of the primary sources must be maintained. Capturing the language of the personal account is just as important as the account itself. As Smitherman (2006) asserts:

“...I want us to think about language as a source of power. And if you want to use language as a tool, as a source of power you’ve got to go way beyond any sort of simple notions about “fo” or “four” and simple notions of correctness. Because what great speakers and writers do is they try to use language as power. They try to move mountains. Because they know that the word, in fact, is power. And it isn’t just in my tradition, in the African American tradition. I’m told that in the time of the ancient Greeks, when the orator Demosthenes spoke, the people simply applauded. But when Paracles spoke, they marched. So what we want people to do with language is to move people, and in fact to make them march.” (p. 4)

It is not simply the figurative language in the excerpt of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech (see line 38 or Excerpt 7) that is unforgettable to Theo’s paternal grandfather (and the rest of the family); it is the way in which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. embodied and performed a distinct Black and reminiscent of the Black Church, which reflects who he is (i.e., a southern, Black preacher) (see The Language and Life Project, 2016). Lastly, embedding AVT of Black Language within the teaching of historical events such as The March on Washington (as illustrated above) not only illuminates the importance of teaching through disciplinary literacy but also negates widely accepted, inaccurate

notions that Black language is anachronistic--a thing of the past--or only spoken by inarticulate Black youth or uneducated Black people who are of the low and working class (see Weldon (2021) for a discussion of Middle-Class African American English).

Theo becomes a Historian:

“If we teach history from a disciplinary perspective, students are not expected to memorize information so much as they are expected to learn to question, read critically, suspend judgment, consider and effectively communicate new interpretations and ‘cultivate puzzlement’” (Lattimer, 2014).

As shown in Excerpt 7, when Theo’s family starts describing their experience engaging in a historical event, the idea of writing an A-grade paper becomes back-seated to an authentic desire to hear and learn from their perspectives. Theo begins to develop what Nokes (2013) terms an appropriate *epistemic stance* or a historical habit of mind, particularly skepticism and open-mindedness as he begins to demonstrate his understanding of how history is learned and to recognize his family’s accounts as evidential sources while he investigatively engages in his family’s storytelling event:

Excerpt 8

Context of scene: After Theo’s family began offering personal accounts of their experience at “The March”.

Theo: What really happened besides the heat and the singing?

...

Theo: It must have been great knowing you guys were going to be part of history.

In Excerpt 8, Theo’s motivation becomes understanding and documenting his family’s experiences through their oral recountings. The storytelling scene ends with Theo heading upstairs to investigate further by exploring cultural artifacts (i.e. primary sources) that his mother, Claire, housed in a drawer. He realized that his families’

stories led to more questions, more research, and “hard discussions about the nature of history as well as the nature of ‘truth’” (Lattimer, p. 61). Hence, as Lattimer (2016) notes, to assume the role of a historian in which they enthusiastically “do history” (i.e., interview, investigate, collaborate, critically think, and write extensively), students must be authentically engaged in the topic. Thus, students must have real purposes and audiences to write for and to receive discipline-based writing instruction.

In addition, sifting through Claire’s drawer of artifacts from the March on Washington also provides the developing historian, Theo, an opportunity to expand his understanding of what is considered textual evidence. Visual literacies include but aren’t limited to maps, political cartoons, photographs, and product packaging, to name a few (Nokes, 2013). Constructing meaning from and essentially building historical understandings and augmentation through these texts requires the same historical literacy skills, sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration, which also require explicit instruction. This excerpt (or clip of the episode) could be used as a launchpad to teach these skills and thus foster an “epistemic stance” of a historian (Nokes, 2013).

While there is much work to do yet on his paper (and in his evolution as a historian), upon exiting the scene, Theo, has come to view members of his family as key, authorial sources, and the propensity to conduct further research.

Excerpt 9

Context of scene: The family has concluded the collective storytelling session.

Theo: This is great; I didn’t have to go to the library after all! All I had to do was have dinner with my family. Thanks!

Discipline-Specific Writing Instruction in History

Noted in an earlier section is what good, general writing instruction looks like across disciplines. These are effective instructional practices that will pair well with disciplinary-specific instructional routines and strategies in the social studies classroom. To apprentice students into the discipline requires social studies teachers to assume the role of facilitators of learning.

Teacher as facilitator

Traditionally, teachers of history assume the role of knowledge-transmitters primarily through lectures--what Freire (1970; 2000) refers to as the banking model of education. According to this model, teachers impart discrete facts, names, and dates to their students with the goal of retention. Through a disciplinary approach, a teacher's role is to facilitate the learning of students or to create disciplinary procedures and instructional routines that set students up to explore, grapple, and discover. To illustrate: While we know little about Theo's teacher, Mr. Pierce, we can assume that he is very familiar with the historical content of Theo's paper (i.e., The March on Washington), but may not have been familiar with the cultural ways in which the people of the historical event expressed their experiences and involvement in the event (via African Verbal Tradition). The goal is not for Mr. Pierce to assume the role of an all-knowing teacher; rather, the goal is for Mr. Pierce to model and impart the historical skills needed for students to be curious explorers of cultural phenomena and events. In addition, many students are cultural insiders of that which they study, so teachers as facilitators must trust students and respect them as co-learners and teachers in this process.

Where Teachers Can Start

Social studies teachers new to the concept of disciplinary literacy can start by becoming familiar with and centering their instruction on the three discipline specific skills of history (described in an earlier section): *sourcing*, *contextualization*, and *corroboration*. Nokes (2013) offers heuristics to aid the teaching and learning of these historical literacy skills.

Several resources about disciplinary literacy and namely historical writing are widely available (most of them have been cited throughout this article). Both Lattimer (2014) and Lent (2016) put theory into practice (see references), provide disciplinary instructional routines and activities, and give examples of disciplinary literacy in action. Social studies teachers can also locate model activities that foster students' disciplinary thinking and argumentative skills in Wineburg and colleagues' (2013) book. The list below includes highly accessible and teacher-friendly professional development materials.

- Reading and Writing in the Disciplines: Big Ideas in Literacy – History/ Social Studies: <https://www.learner.org/series/reading-writing-in-the-disciplines/big-ideas-in-literacy-history-social-studies/>
- Southwestern's Guide for Writing in History <https://www.southwestern.edu/live/files/4173-guide-for-writing-in-historypdf>
- Stanford University's Reading Like a Historian <https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons>
- General Education Leadership Network's (GELN) Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom (Secondary Social Studies: pp. 20-25) https://literacyessentials.org/downloads/gelndocs/dle_6-12_062821_electronic_1.pdf

Refer to Appendix B for a step-by-step guide to using this episode of The Cosby Show (Knott, 1987) to introduce culturally relevant disciplinary writing as described in this article.

Concluding Thoughts

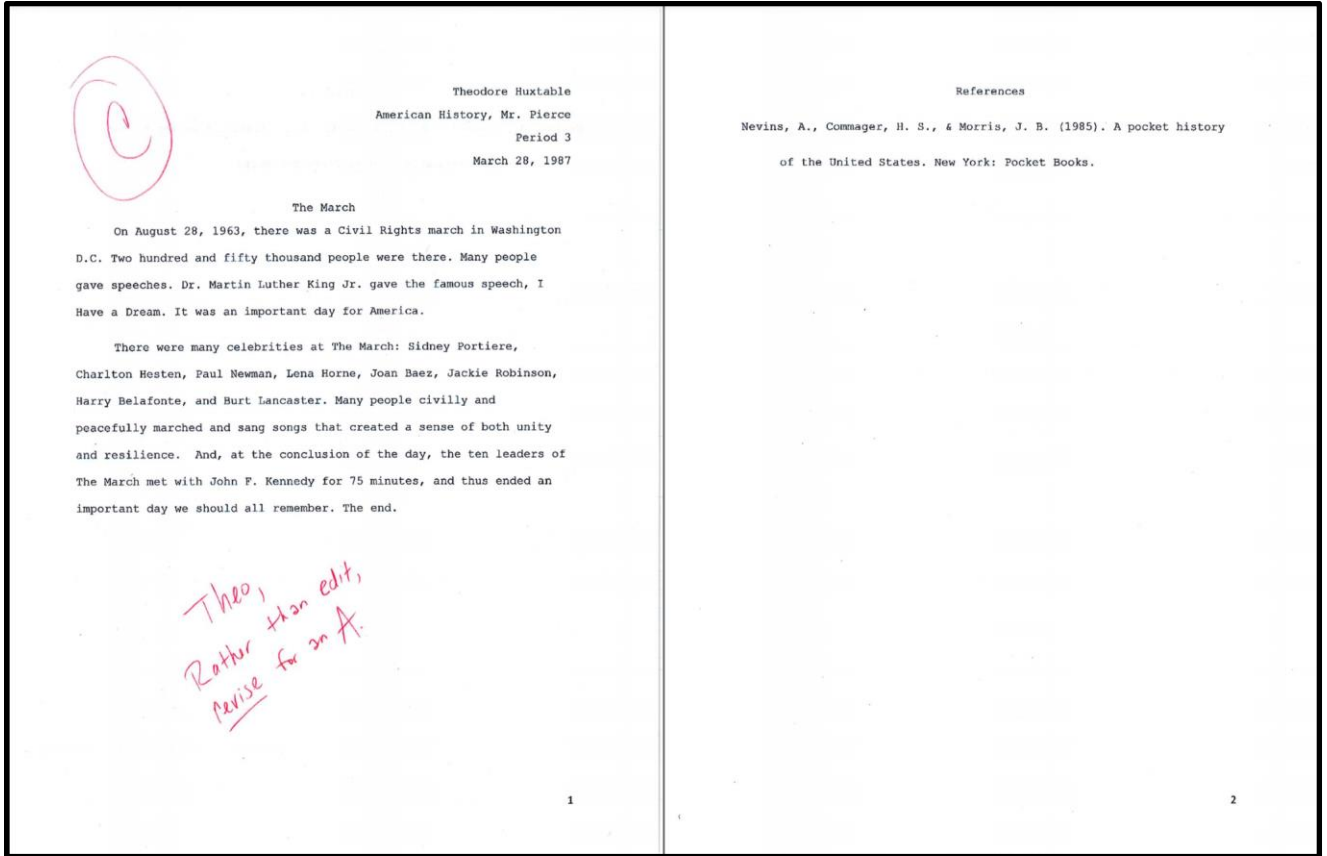
While the problem with adolescent writing across and within the disciplines persists, this article is a reminder that there is a viable starting point in remedying this age-old issue. Not only will students gain advanced literacy skills (thinking and writing) from a disciplinary literacy approach, but teachers will also have the opportunity to teach social justice topics (in this case socio-linguistic justice) in culturally relevant ways wherein they incite interest and motivation, study cultural phenomena, and explicitly teach the skills that are germane to the discipline of history.

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Appendix A
Theo Huxtable's History Paper, Entitled "The March"



Appendix B

Orienting Student to the Idea of Historical Writing with Theo's "C" Paper

In addition to the resources listed in the article, social studies teachers could introduce the idea of historical writing. Below is an outline of how teachers might use Theo and his paper (with or without the episode, which can be viewed and/or purchased via DVD, or digitally via streaming networks like Amazon Prime Video, Sling TV, etc.). While this show predates students today, teachers can provide context to draw students in. When viewing the episode with students, it will also be important to mention an error in the sitcom, a historical inaccuracy that Claire, Theo's mother articulates. That is, she states the March was at the Washington Monument when, in fact, it occurred at the Lincoln Memorial.

- Start by presenting the issue that Theo Huxtable got a C on his history paper and that he does not know why. You could ask students to pretend to be Theo's peer and present his paper to them. Then, ask students to list possible reasons why he may have gotten a C rather than an A. Also have students first list what Theo did well in his paper; pointing out "what works" with a piece of writing is a good peer-feedback practice. You could have students work collectively to respond to the following prompts:
 - Notice and note the strengths of Theo's paper.
 - What does this paper (from a high school student) lack? What does it need? Be as specific as you can here.
 - Do you think this paper reflects Theo's ability to write or the teacher's instruction? Why do you think this?
 - What kind of instruction from his teacher do you think Theo needs to breathe life into this paper?
- You could have students create a K-W-L chart and answer questions such as:
 - What do historians do?
 - How do historians read, write, and communicate?
- Then have students jigsaw the article, *Disciplinary Literacy Strategies in Content Area Classes* (Shanahan, 2015), to learn about literacy in the disciplines (honing in on the "history section" on pages 8-17). Invite students to share what they learned in relation to the question listed above. Students can work in groups to begin filling out the "L" on the K-W-L chart. They could also revisit Theo's paper and add informed revisions.
- You can begin connecting students' newly acquired knowledge of historical literacy to the *Benchmarks for Evidence and Indicators of Historical Writing in Students' Essays* rubric (see Figure 1). While giving the students the rubric may seem like for students' intangible goals to attain, assure them that you are

introducing them to what you will be teaching them to do. You could also use this as a formative assessment opportunity to gauge what students already know about the criteria as you prepare to fill in procedural knowledge gaps throughout the quarter, semester, or school year.

- To build an appropriate “epistemic stance” (Nokes, 2013) of a historian, teachers could create “crusade activity” like the one detailed in Nokes (2013) wherein students are presented with an assortment of texts that “contain[...] disagreements, contradictions, and evidence...to demonstrate that there is no simple textbook to answer a [complex] question” about the past (p. 59). Teachers could use excerpt 8 or show the clip of the episode “The March” and then create a mock of Claire’s drawer of artifacts and evidence where students embody a historian while answering a complex question, like “Besides the singing and the heat, what other moods were present during the March on Washington? Was it all communal and positive as suggested by Theo’s family members, who were key witnesses and principle participants?”
- If you purchase the episode to show students, you can ask them the following questions throughout and/or after the episode to get them acquainted with the idea of historical writing.
 - While the family engaged in storytelling, Theo’s mother Claire says, “See, Theo, that’s the one thing that you can’t get in the history books.” How might historical accounts related in textbooks be incorrect from a single perspective? (Lent, 2016)
 - What role does Black Language play in Black social movements and in the way activists describe the movements in which they initiate or are a part.
- After watching the episode, you could even have students engage in some experimental writing. They could assume the role of Theo and begin revising his paper using the accounts from his family.