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What Counts as Literacy in the Polytechnic Hispanic Serving Institution? Culturally Sustaining Frameworks for Writing Assignments, Assessment, and Language Use

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Abstract

This article theorizes and describes classroom pedagogies that support the development of students’ disciplinary literacies through culturally sustaining, socially just approaches. Drawing primarily from the framework of culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) (Paris, 2012; Alim, Paris & Wong, 2020), the authors suggest strategies for writing assignment and assessment designs that support students’ multilingual and multiliterate ways of knowing. These strategies intentionally invite and integrate students’ multiple ways of knowing and being in and outside of the polytechnic HSI. They also ask instructors to decenter the ways that whiteness operates in their curricula and programs. The authors conclude the article by arguing that culturally sustaining approaches must be part of how instructors think about disciplinary literacy development in the HSI polytechnic context.

Keywords: literacy, language, writing assignments, writing assessment, culturally sustaining

What counts as literacy? This question is a timely and pertinent one for instructors and administrators to ask at Cal Poly Humboldt. As a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and a newly designated and developing polytechnic campus, what students do as writers and readers across courses and in their major programs is imbricated in the Cal Poly Humboldt identification. But literacy is not only school-based, it is also shaped by and reflective of all of our identities, our past and present lived experiences of reading, speaking, writing and being. How educators understand and teach toward disciplinary literacy, then, requires them to not only understand students’ personal, social, cultural and disciplinary literacies as enmeshed, it also invites them to view students’ literacies as dynamic and flexible, as having the potential to enrich learning and each disciplinary community. In other words, we all have and display multiple literacies, and these appear
in different ways as we navigate the globally networked world and ever-evolving “new technologies, [which have] changed the economies and dynamics of publishing and expanded the possibilities of expression” (Bazerman 2013: 21).

Philosopher Walter Ong articulated writing as a distinct technology that restructures thought (1992). By naming writing as a technology, we can see how this practice works under the broad umbrella of the polytechnic institution. The etymological roots of the term polytechnic come from the Greek polytechnos, meaning “skilled in many techniques or arts.” While the polytechnic designation for Cal Poly Humboldt has primarily focused on building new STEM programs and hands-on learning opportunities for students in STEM fields, knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing across all disciplines relies on communication, including—and often especially—written communication. While current constructions of the term polytechnic at Cal Poly Humboldt tend to appropriately emphasize “hands-on” or applied learning for students, we suggest that the term polytechnic on our campus should be re-conceptualized to include all forms of the applied practices of communication: written, spoken, visual, embodied and multilingual. This kind of re-conceptualization can allow campus stakeholders to deeply see and make visible the ways that knowledge is and can be shared in the world.

In this article, we focus on pedagogies for antiracist writing instruction and assessment that bring a multiliteracies perspective to disciplinary and polytechnic learning. We present these pedagogies through the framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris 2012; Alim and Paris, 2017; Alim, Paris, and Wong 2020). Because equity-focused and antiracist approaches to teaching, including culturally sustaining frameworks, are designed to remain fluid and responsive to the contexts in which they are applied, we localize and operationalize the theories and strategies shared in this article in the Cal Poly Humboldt HSI and polytechnic context. In this text, we work as a co-authoring team of cross-disciplinary Cal Poly Humboldt faculty to describe applications of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) to literacy development in the postsecondary classroom. Two individuals of our authoring team, Beth Eschenbach (Environmental Systems Engineering) and Jill Anderson (Kinesiology/Public Health) provide personal reflections that illustrate applications of CSP. Jill and Beth were faculty participants in multi-week faculty learning communities (FLC) facilitated by article co-authors Lisa Tremain, Nicolette Amann, and Kerry Marsden. The curriculum and content of the FLCs focused on antiracist writing assignment and assessment designs with CSP as a common organizing framework. Some best practices for writing instruction and assessment that emerged from across the FLCs are shared later in this text.

But a caution: while this text describes strategies and applications of CSP as part of writing instruction, we do not intend them to be viewed as easy solutions or quick fixes for developing students’ literacy. Equity and antiracism don’t work in these ways. Instead, the article’s purpose is to invite educators to remain committed to the ongoing projects of equity and antiracism in their classrooms, offices, and programs, and to turn toward deeper conversations about how literacy development happens for students in their academic disciplines. We suggest that a first step toward this exploration requires naming and understanding the ways that dominant discourses, namely middle and upper-class white epistemologies, monoculturalism and Standard American English (SAE), have operated in our own and students’ educational histories and literacy development. We draw upon Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) as one approach to decentering whiteness in the writing curriculum and anchoring writing pedagogy and assessment practices to students’ diverse ways of knowing and being. Jill’s and Beth’s reflections (and the theories and pedagogical applications that inform them, as we will share) are intended to illuminate the overarching claim of this text: written communication pedagogies that are attuned and responsive to minoritized students’ lived experiences and ways of knowing are essential for Cal Poly Humboldt’s vision of a 21st century polytechnic HSI.

We begin the article by drawing theoretical connections between CSP and traditionalized and emergent pedagogies for writing. We then dissect the larger question What counts as literacy? into three sub questions: What counts as writing? What counts as assessment? and What counts as language in the discipline? We offer ex-
amples of culturally sustaining approaches that can be applied to writing assignment design, assessment, and language use, and we follow these explorations with Jill’s and Beth’s reflections on teaching and assessing writing for equity in their own disciplines.

**How Did You Learn to Write in the Discipline?**

We came to the question What counts as literacy? after participating in and facilitating various professional development discussions, workshops and learning communities on equitable writing instruction for faculty across disciplines at Cal Poly Humboldt. Across discussions, we noticed that some instructors found it difficult to break away from long-standing requirements in their teaching of writing. They typically assigned entrenched, long-standing disciplinary genres and prioritized (and punished students for lack of fluency in) Standard American English (SAE), what April Baker-Bell names “White Mainstream English”, as part of their writing assessment. While faculty who attended FLC sessions showed dedication to and curiosity about improving student writing, they typically discussed students through deficit frameworks: students “can’t write” and do not have the resources necessary to succeed as writers.

But the truth is that students can write. They arrive at college with multiple literacies that inform the writing that they do, literacies that are linguistic, cultural, social, and academic. They include, for example, their social group discourses, cross-linguistic and cross-dialect knowledges, and new media literacies (Baca, Hinojosa, and Murphy 2019; Shelton 2019). Yet because typified disciplinary communication practices are reproduced as standards for learning, and because these standards almost exclusively derive from and uphold dominant/white ways of knowing, writing, and speaking, students’ rich and various literacies are typically not invited to appear in the most consequential writing that they do for school (see Inoue 2015; Inoue 2016). When students’ non-dominant literacies do appear, they are often assessed as not meeting standards, requiring correction, and/or punished via low or lowered grades. In this article, we suggest that deep, sustained and reflective professional development that involves collaborative study of and experimentation with antiracist, transparent and culturally-sustaining pedagogical theories can disrupt narratives that describe students’ communicative practices in deficit constructs and transform curricular structures to be more inclusive and democratic.

In FLC meetings, we asked instructors to reflect on how they learned to write and how they learned to teach writing in their disciplines as an entry point into our exploration of the “students can’t write” belief. What became clear to us was that instructors’ beliefs about writing instruction and writing excellence were deeply rooted in their personal literacy histories and especially in their disciplinary training. Most university faculty’s disciplinary training, and specifically their learning and practicing of disciplinary writing, happens in graduate school where they are taught to reproduce, value and uphold entrenched disciplinary genres, particular criteria for “good” writing, and certain beliefs about style and grammar. These genres, criteria and beliefs are not ideologically neutral. They almost exclusively privilege upper-class and middle-class white ways of knowing because they come from racialized academic histories where whiteness is over-represented and over-replicated, where non-white dialects and epistemologies are not viewed as legitimate (Inoue 2016; Baker-Bell 2020; Falconer 2022). When instructors teach students the ways they were taught to write in the discipline, students continue to learn to write (and learn what writing is) according to entrenched/white values. These values are so endemic to U.S. institutions that they are nearly invisible in everyday practice, but they result in gatekeeping, exclusion and/or expectations of assimilation for BIPOC and marginalized students in the academy.

In order to understand how whiteness operates in the post-secondary institution, we can begin by noticing how white institutional presence (WIP) structures it and how WIP works to mask inequity there (Gusa 2010; Falconer 2022). At Cal Poly Humboldt, collectively and individually, we can reckon with WIP by examining how whiteness is privileged in our classrooms and programs, despite (or in ignorance of) our HSI designation. In her groundbreaking analysis of anti-black linguistic racism, Baker-Bell (2020) articulates this reckoning:
Educators have to be honest with themselves about the ways they uphold and perpetuate white linguistic hegemony in their classrooms and in their everyday lives. You can’t be out here saying that you believe in linguistic diversity at the same time of shutting students down as soon as they open their mouths. You have to be about this life for real for real! You have to be ready and willing to challenge everything you once understood about language and what students need in a language education. You have to be ready for the messiness that comes with this process. You also don’t have to do everything by yourself…(100)

This article is an invitation to respond to Baker-Bell’s charge: to get messy, to “challenge everything you once understood about language and what students need in a language education.” In what follows, we share ways that culturally sustaining approaches to teaching and assessing writing in the disciplines can count-er WIP and traditionalized practices that exclude and harm BIPOC and all marginalized students. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies have the potential to respond to entrenched practices that perpetuate white racial privilege, to honor and integrate students’ lived experiences and multiliteracies, and to connect them deeply and meaningfully to disciplinary learning.

A Culturally Sustaining Approach
to Teaching and Learning

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) expand on decades of research and scholarship about asset-based approaches to education, including Friere’s (1970) critical pedagogy, Ladson-Billings’s (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, and Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez’s (1992) funds of knowledge (Paris 2012; Alim and Paris 2017; Alim et al 2020). These and other cultural-asset approaches to pedagogy have long rec-ognized learners’ backgrounds, cultures, languages and dialects as strengths that can and should be leveraged in program and classroom designs. Yet a limitation of asset-oriented (and some diversity, equity, and inclusion approaches), as Paris critiques, is that they do not do enough to decenter whiteness. CSP presents a critical framework that shifts educators from beliefs that equity work means teaching marginalized students to perform white, middle-class, hetero and ableist norms, to actively naming and decentering white/monocultural approaches to learning. This shift requires instructors to grapple with the messiness (and richness) that comes with a true integration of diversity and difference in our programs, classrooms, and institutional communities.

CSP requires instructors to “pay close attention to differences and overlaps in categorizations of race, ethnicity, language, and culture, understanding that these identity [and other] markers cannot and should not be flattened or generalized” (Gonzalez 2019: 178, our emphasis). CSP also asks educators to name and resist the ways that cultural erasure and exclusion operate in classrooms and academic disciplines due to the overrepresentation of whiteness in them. Shelton (2020) charges instructors to view inclusion as not only a strategy, but as a restructuring of traditionalized approaches for learning and knowledge-making. From her perspective as a Black female scholar, she writes, “To include me is to share the labor of making sense of my intellectual contribution with me, even when (perhaps especially when) my ways of knowing, and being, my references and insights are not familiar or easily accessible to those of you who are operating out of Western knowledge and value systems” (18, our emphasis).

This flipping of the idea of access—the recognition that the predominantly white faculty at Cal Poly Humboldt might not themselves easily access students’ diverse linguistic, literate, and cultural ways of knowing as part of the institutional culture—works to mirror the lack of access marginalized students have historically encoun-

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1. We acknowledge that while we refer to the ways that whiteness operates in learning institutions, we are aware of it within the context of intersectionality. We also intend for this term to implicate the ways that other dominant ways of knowing and being intersect and similarly operate in the academy, including male, upper- and middle-class status, heterosexual, cis-gender, and able-bodied ways, to oppress various intersectional and non-dominant ways of knowing, such as BIPOC, working class and economically poor, female, LGBTQIA, and disabled.)
What Counts as Literacy in the Polytechnic Hispanic Serving Institution?

CSP confronts white institutional presence by inviting and valuing marginalized students’ multiple literacies and different ways of knowing of being in the post-secondary institution, but CSP involves more than the actions of inviting and valuing. To teach through CSP, educators must:

…perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation. CSP positions dynamic cultural dexterity as a necessary good, and sees the goal of learning as additive rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy exists wherever education sustains the lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling. (Alim and Paris 2017:1, our emphasis)

When it comes to teaching and assessing writing in each discipline, CSP can work heuristically to reveal students’ literacies as more than what they know about academic reading and writing. As Gee’s (1989) foundational research on literacy and discourse notes, demonstrations of literacy ask communicators to play different roles at different times. In other words, your literacy appears in different ways depending upon each context where you show it. These contexts ask you to engage in saying-writing-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations in order to communicate (526). In this article, while we limit our discussion of CSP-informed approaches for disciplinary literacy development to writing assignment designs, assessment approaches, and language use as a negotiated practice, we emphasize Gee’s definition of literacy as saying-writing-doing-being-valuing to remind readers (and ourselves) that the phenomenon of literacy is always sociocultural, deeply embodied and highly contextualized. It actively moves within but also beyond language-based boundaries, including texts like this one.

What do We Mean by "Writing"?

Earlier, we noted via Ong (1992) that writing is a technology that restructures thought. You might draw a map or take a photo to communicate an idea or a message for someone. Probably you have scribbled a reminder note, sent a quick text to a loved one, or added a “like” or a heart to a social media post. You regularly (almost without pause) use multiple and varied language codes—your linguistic knowledge—to inscribe symbols and form text to complete activities. We write across modes (ways to communicate) and media (textual forms or genre) to make sense of each day, of tasks and projects, and of our inner and outer worlds (see: Labov 1972; Heath 1983; Prior 2006). In other words, we use codes and symbols everyday as discursive tools; this all counts as writing.

Writing is also always circulating. No individual instance of writing exists in a vacuum. When we write, there are various texts connecting to and moving in time and space around each communicative task at hand (Gries and Brooke, 2018; Trimbur 2000). For example, while this article ultimately appears in a scholarly journal as a final edited draft, there were many, many other texts that circulated to form it (e.g., calendar invitations, marginal notes, flowcharts, emails, Post-its, and collaborative electronic documents) and there will be texts that iterate from it (citations, critiques, lesson ideas). The ways that writing circulates across modes and forms illuminate it as a rich social, cognitive, and applied practice, an essential working knowledge that illustrates the polytechnic institutional context as a place of applied learning.

As an applied practice and a technology, writing involves ongoing and flexible applications of thinking, composing, and language use in and across modes and media. But how we engage in writing (and as writers) is always informed by the beliefs and values of the communities where we practice it (Gee 1989; Delpit 1992; Delpit, 2013). Perhaps it is obvious to you that the values and practices of writing and communication look and feel different across different communities; we emphasize these differences here to make explicit
that writing is never neutral. Discipline-specific and major-based courses, for example, are spaces where values about writing are always present, whether explicit or tacit. As example, rules about “professionalism” (as we discuss later), citation style, concision, “thesis-driven,” passive voice, and figure captions are just a few examples of how these values operate differently across disciplines.

As students apprentice to writing in their major programs, they learn what is and isn’t valued about communication in the discipline, and they build disciplinary literacy, disciplinary knowledge, and disciplinary identities. As instructors (and experts) from and of the disciplines, we hope that what we teach students about them—including what kinds of texts they should learn to write and the thinking they should do in them—transfers out of the major program into other contexts, e.g., a profession, public service, or a graduate program. And because we ourselves have learned through and teach in ways that orient learning toward transfer, we have formed beliefs and values about particular kinds of texts that students should write. Yet, we can interrogate these beliefs and practices through culturally-sustaining perspectives of teaching and learning, beginning with an assessment of the extent which WIP operates in our disciplines and then working toward inclusive, liberatory approaches to writing assignment designs.

What Counts as a Culturally Sustaining Writing Assignment?

A CSP approach to writing instruction (via Alim et al, 2020) asks instructors to deeply examine disciplinary beliefs and values as captured and reproduced by the texts (genres) students are assigned. CSP requires instructors to critique the kinds of disciplinary identities we ask students to “try on” when we ask them to write in particular forms. It also pushes instructors to work with students to analyze who disciplinary texts are written for, for what purposes, whose voices, and ways of knowing are typically represented, and who is excluded.

CSP and genre

Many entrenched disciplinary texts—for example, the constraints of the research paper, the longform essay, or the technical report—come from long-established historical traditions of academic writing, from histories where less than a century ago, it was extremely rare to see any bodies in a university setting other than white males’. Because entrenched traditions of genre and Standard American English (SAE) persist in the academy today, white ways of knowing and thinking have continued to be privileged. As noted above Falconer (2022) names this phenomenon as white institutional practice (WIP), which often appears as neutral communication styles, such as objectivity, linearity, proceduralism, and alphabetic texts, but these styles are always ideological1. CSP presents us with an opportunity to examine the genres we assign in our disciplines; it shifts disciplinary teaching toward questions such as: Whose methods and which texts create knowledge? Later in this discussion, for example, Beth reflects on discussions about genre in the field of engineering. She notes that while her understandings and experiments with genre are still emerging, she now intentionally explores the purposes and constraints of the genres of her discipline with students.

Students’ new media literacies are an especially rich locale for working with genre in creative and rhetorically powerful ways. Memes, discord servers and TikTok videos are genres that illuminate the ways that students are already sharing information, solving problems, and making decisions as they write in online spaces.

CSP and student choice

Instructors can apply CSP by offering opportunities for student choice in assignment designs, including expanding the kinds of texts that students are invited to write and the subjects that they are invited to write about. There are different methods for thinking about student choice as part of writing assignment design. Applications of CSP might involve students as agents in shaping parts

1. Consider institutions outside of academia, such as law, medicine, and government policy as additional examples of how WIP is similarly embedded in communicative forms across institutions; these kinds of discourses are disguised (by whiteness) as neutral communicative practices, yet they result in social inequity.
of the assignment for themselves and in collaboration with each other, including the kinds of texts they write and the audiences they write for. CSP-informed writing assignments should be relevant to real-world disciplinary problems that reflect students’ lived experiences and invite students to summarize, analyze, or create solutions for problems in genres that communicate information to specific (not only academic) audiences. These approaches engage students to critically analyze how they might effectively communicate with different audiences and consider how and why communication about disciplinary knowledge changes across these contexts (Russel et al, 2009).

While dominant (entrenched) disciplinary genres are ones students realistically might need to learn and practice as part of developing a disciplinary identity or as professional preparation, it is also likely they have had little experience writing these kinds of texts, and it is rare that they have written them in their real-world professional or public contexts. A CSP approach to assigning a typical disciplinary genre can open the subject-matter space of the text to include multiple experiences, viewpoints and epistemologies. Students might, for example, write about the people, ideas, movements, or issues they care about within the constraints of the assigned genre, or draw upon their histories, backgrounds, and lived experiences to consider subjects they want to address. Shelton’s (2019) teaching of business writing, for example, asks students to craft a data-informed report for a board of directors of a large company to describe the need for lactation spaces and gender-inclusive restrooms. She asks students to explore different rhetorical strategies for composing a policy or report for a white male audience of “bosses” about the needs of a marginalized community—one that students choose. Shelton finds that “undergraduate students who are learning to communicate with the specialized technical genres and rhetorical conventions of their disciplines are often operating under a logic that suggests to them that difference—including differences among bodies—should be either neutralized or commodified. This epistemology forecloses the possibility of difference as a way to creating...more effective communication” (18). Shelton’s point is that difference can be a critical and generative framework for fostering disciplinary literacy development. CSP illuminates difference (from the dominant discourse) as a distinct shaping component for how students might be invited to write in response to disciplinary assignments.

What Counts as Culturally Sustaining Writing Assessment?

Traditionalized approaches to writing assessment have also structured students’ understandings about writers, writing and learning. As we’ve noted, these approaches privilege and perpetuate white ways of knowing. Inoue’s (2015) book Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching Writing for a Socially Just Future tackles and resists traditionalized assessment and grading designs (e.g., disaggregated rubrics, decontextualized criteria, holistic letter grades) to focus on students’ time and labor toward their learning goals. Inoue analyzes commonly used writing rubrics and grading schemes to show the ways these privilege SAE and mastery of normalized (but not neutral) standards for writing. Inoue argues that these approaches harm marginalized students because they require them to assimilate white-dominant literacies in order to be successful in school: they are punished with low(er) grades or excluded from advancing when they do not assimilate white literacies. When marginalized students are evaluated according to this privileging, these structures also reproduce hierarchies that uphold white supremacy. Inoue argues for reimagined writing assessment designs that facilitate environments where learners improve via feedback rather than evaluative marks, where they can focus on ideas, as opposed to mistakes. While this article does not cover Inoue’s theories and practices of labor-based grading in detail, we share two culturally sustaining assessment practices for writing assessment that evolved from his work.

Like the normalized and entrenched genres of the disciplines and professions, grading rubrics, too, have material and social effects. Qualitative and subjective terminology in rubric categories, such as clear, sophisticated, organized, and sufficient, are those we might see in a typified disaggregated rubric. But these terms homogenize beliefs and values about writing and make assumptions about how students should move “toward the
alignment of knowledge”—or code for practicing and performing whiteness (Falconer quoting McMullin, 40). Not only do these terms reproduce white beliefs and values, they also result in gatekeeping, where some students meet the criteria because they have had experience with, access to and practice in the discourse, while other students have not.

Stripping qualified terms from writing criteria to the minimum essential engenders another culturally sustaining approach to writing assessment design. This action begins by distilling the minimum essential criteria for proficient writing and removing qualified or arbitrary terms from these criteria. For example, we might shift a criterion for analysis from “clearly and accurately evaluates conceptual and factual claims” to “evaluates conceptual and factual claims.” This kind of intentional rhetorical shift for writing criteria removes any interpretive and opaque terms from evaluative criteria. A minimum essential approach to criteria-building strives toward achievable and transparent learning goals. It allows students to justify how they define and practice assessment and evaluation.

The minimum essential design also supports alternatives to the highly subjective process of assigning grades to writing. It gives students room to write from and beyond the criteria in ways that can be creative and innovative. Beth’s reflection identifies her own shifts to move toward ungraded and formative feedback on student writing that helps them to move toward or creatively beyond minimum standards. This approach, as she articulates below, results in more students successfully developing conceptual and disciplinary understandings.

As a companion to minimum essential designs for writing assignment criteria, instructors can also replace scaled structures and point values in their grading rubrics. One-point rubrics, for example, simplify evaluative categories to met or not yet met as opposed to below proficiency, proficiency and exceeds proficiency evaluations in traditionalized rubrics (See Figure 1). The one-point design resists and transforms letter grade and 6-point rubric hierarchies to focus on (ideally formative) feedback aligned to each criteria for success, and it can support students to see their writing in the discipline as developing. Students can, for example, notice patterns of “not yet” across writing criteria and can revise their texts to address “not yet” evaluations. Even when students consistently “meet” all criteria in a one-point rubric, written feedback from their peers and instructor about each criterion can identify next steps for growth. An added benefit: When these two strategies are combined (e.g. using

### SINGLE-POINT RUBRIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria 1:</th>
<th>Description of criteria. How does the evidence and reasoning meet or not yet meet the criteria?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 2:</td>
<td>Description of criteria. How does the evidence and reasoning meet or not yet meet the criteria?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 3:</td>
<td>Description of criteria. How does the evidence and reasoning meet or not yet meet the criteria?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 4:</td>
<td>Description of criteria. How does the evidence and reasoning meet or not yet meet the criteria?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Yet</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Meets/Exceeds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Areas for growth &amp; revision</td>
<td>Expectations for this performance</td>
<td>Evidence of Meeting Expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1:** Single-point rubric template, adapted from Jennifer Gonzalez (2015).
one-point rubrics to assess minimum essential criteria), they are easier for instructors, student writers and their peers to measure. Yet instructors must be sure that their assessment designs are grounded in equity, not efficiency. When instructors experiment with new writing assessment designs, CSP requires them to commit to exploring ideological questions related to teaching, learning, and grading, including the purposes and material effects of evaluation on students in relation to each assignment.

Echoing the discussion of choice as part of writing assignment design in the previous section, students are also more engaged in their learning when they have choices in how they are assessed. Minimum criteria and one-point approaches are only part of what it means to design holistic approaches to writing assessment. These designs should include students’ self- and/or peer-assessments as valid and valued parts of their responses to each assignment. Jill’s reflections later in this text describes an innovative approach to peer feedback in her classroom. These approaches to assessment emphasize learning over evaluation and, when used transparently and consistently, they emphasize a culture of feedback and collaboration where everyone’s learning, including different kinds of linguistic knowledge, matters.

What Counts as Language?

Each major program on the Cal Poly Humboldt campus is a distinct discourse community that uses language to negotiate, shape, communicate, and challenge its ever-evolving values and practices. Discourse communities and the language in them are fluid; they change across time and as participants move in and out of them, though some discourse communities are more fluid than others (e.g., consider again the fairly static discourses of law, medicine, and government policy). While each discipline uses a specialized language (a lexis), discourses can and do change over time and through negotiated participation (see: Gee 2004).

Now pause to think about how many different groups (or discourse communities) you belong to. How have you—consciously or not—learned and practiced the expectations of language in each of them? Teams, clubs, social groups, workplaces, online groups, gaming communities, and major programs are all examples of discourse communities. The discourses that are used in and across these groups change through members’ negotiation of language over time. Humans tend to use various translingual, code-switching and code-meshing practices as part of navigating the changes across discourses. Understanding that language is always negotiated through participation can help instructors critically analyze the disciplinary lexis through key questions: Who has language power? Who polices language? What styles of language dominate and what identities are represented through language? How do I negotiate with students about language? And: where does whiteness and linguistic racism appear in my approaches to teaching disciplinary discourse?

Professionalism, for example, as a concept that students are often expected to perform in writing in their major programs, helps us explore these queries. For many students from marginalized identities, expectations for professionalism in written communication can be coded as the expectation to perform whiteness; this means they need to engage in code-switching in order to be successful as a writer. When code-switching, language users leave behind one communicative code and switch to another. In our disciplines, this means that some students believe they need to (or they are required to) abandon a code, such as their heritage dialect or language, in order to assimilate and perform a white privileging disciplinary discourse, which is typically viewed as what it means to sound and be “professional.” Instructors can work with students to explore the extent to which professionalism (or the professions where the discipline is applied) has shifted over time in the field or how it changes depending on geographic or community contexts. Later in this article, Jill discusses expectations for “professional language” in the field of health promotion and her explorations to design assignments that allow students to convey concepts of the profession through a variety of language styles and approaches.

As an alternative to the ways that code-switching promotes assimilationist practices that reproduce white ways of knowing, instructors can apply CSP frameworks to sustain students’ multilingual and multi-dialectal knowledges by inviting translingual and code-meshing.
orientations into their teaching of writing (see: Canagarajah 2013; Canagarajah 2016). Hybridized cross-cultural languages like Spanglish or social languages like internet speak are examples of how translanguaging and code-meshing work in creative and strategic ways to support meaningful communication (e.g., “Watcha le” or “I googled it” or “It was gr8 to see you.”), but these are rarely valued in the written work that students do for school-based assignments. Acknowledging the flexibility and creativity of translanguaging and code-meshing in the writing students are asked to do, however, can yield new ideas, structures, and insights about the discipline and disciplinary work itself. Instructional and assessment designs that maintain flexibility about how students use language give them permission to innovate and creatively communicate to meet expectations of disciplinary discourse communities.

But teaching and assessing language in flexible ways does not mean there are no “rules” for language. Rather, as language scholars Lu and Horner (2015) illustrate in this discussion about translingual practices in the classroom, it means shifting dispositions toward and about language:

[T]aking a translingual approach does not prescribe the forms of writing that students are to produce. Instead, it calls on students (and their teachers) to develop specific dispositions toward languages, language users, contexts and consequences of language use. By recognizing writers’ agency in and responsibility for all their language productions, whether these seem to reproduce standardized forms of writing or deviate from them, [a translingual approach] is applicable and of benefit to all students (and all writers), including those deemed mainstream monolinguists and those deemed multilinguals. (28)

Understanding our own and others’ agency as language users is key to understanding how and to what degree these practices can work to address linguistic racism. Instructors might, for example, examine how whiteness and/or linguistic racism operates in the field. This kind of work means instructors—and students—must understand the stakes at hand: translanguaging and code-meshing in some communities or contexts might be extremely beneficial; they might help writers communicate or create new meanings and knowledge, and students can link linguistic flexibility to how problems are solved or addressed. In other contexts, translanguaging and code-meshing may be risky; by using them, a writer or speaker might fail to meet the discourse community’s standards, which could mean losing or not getting hired for a job, low grades, marginalization, or exclusion. We can work with students to explore the benefits and risks of translanguaging and code-meshing in our disciplines and support their agency in deciding whether and how to make choices around languages use. This requires instructors to understand students’ use of translanguaging and code-meshing as flexible, dynamic, and creative ways to communicate rather than right or wrong ways to communicate.

Integrating students translingual and code-meshing affordances into teaching does not mean students shouldn’t pay attention to (and learn and practice) the codes and expectations of a disciplinary discourse; rather, it means that instructors can help students develop critical awareness of disciplinary norms and expectations and how these work in asymmetrical relations of power within the discipline and institution. As Canagarjah notes, “However unfair and limited they may be, [disciplinary] norms and ideologies have to be taken seriously. Social and educational success means engaging with these norms, though this doesn’t mean uncritical acceptance or conformity” (2013: 9). So, while instructors may have strong justifications for why students should practice and develop fluency in a particular language style in order to meet disciplinary expectations, they must remain critically conscious—and help students develop critical consciousness—of how these norms operate.

There are various practices that support culturally sustaining approaches to language use in writing instruction and assessment, such as:

• Ask students about their language backgrounds. Discuss the different ways they will use language early in the term to situate discussions about disciplinary discourse.
• Discuss disciplinary discourse as a fluency. Acknowledge how WIP informs the rules of fluency.
• Provide students with both low- and high-stakes opportunities to write in their own voices and through their linguistic experiences.
• Explicitly invite students to consider when and how their linguistic and dialectical practices can be purposefully applied to their writing.
• Unpack subjective and racialized terms like professionalism with students and invite them to redefine these terms in ways that feel safe and accessible to them.
• Don't view language as a problem that needs fixing. Recognize that error itself is culturally constructed; it is where one or more members of the communicative act refuse to participate in negotiation.
• Avoid penalizing students for perceived language errors. Point to patterns in language use to help students determine whether and how they will move toward disciplinary or language fluency.
• Engage students to review their language choices through inquiry: “This word/sentence confused me because ___. Can you tell me about this choice?”
• Be willing to let what confuses you stand as a purposeful rhetorical or linguistic choice of the writer. This approach models language as negotiation.
• View and celebrate language differences as the norm.

This limited list is intended to call for a larger shift: programs and individual faculty at Cal Poly Humboldt must account for the ways that white language and expectations of its assimilation work against the HSI designation and specifically against Chicana/Latina students’ success and the success of all marginalized students. Enríquez-Loya and Leon (2017) argue that HSIs cannot only consider “curricular topics [in their HSI design] but [they must also consider] the practices that reflect our Chicana/Latina beliefs and rhetoric, as well as learning outcomes and assessments that utilize our HSI identity as part of our design methodology” (214). To make our HSI identity visible to students, Cal Poly Humboldt instructors can invite translanguaging practices for writing into their instructional designs, and they can practice feedback and assessment practices that inhabit language as negotiated practice. These approaches require faculty and administrators at Cal Poly Humboldt to maintain a critical consciousness about how students learn, including acknowledging and working to transform the ways that racism impacts literacy, language and writing in postsecondary institutions.

Reflections from Two Cal Poly Humboldt Faculty on Teaching and Assessing Writing

Though we have separated the broad question What counts as literacy? into three questions and sections above, developing disciplinary literacy cannot be separated so neatly. Literacy development requires learners to engage in nearly simultaneous and integrated practices of reading, writing, speaking, listening and being. In order to maintain a critical consciousness toward writing instruction and assessment, instructors must experiment with, reflect on, and adjust instruction in collaboration with their students and colleagues. Instructors also need models that show the literacy of the discipline in action. In this section, two reflections as written by two Cal Poly Humboldt faculty, Jill Anderson (Kinesiology/Public Health) and Beth Eschenbach (Environmental Resources Engineering), consider literacy development (their own and their students’) as integrated actions of reading, writing, speaking, listening and being. Both Jill and Beth attended professional development workshops and/or multi-week faculty learning communities on equitable approaches to writing instruction at Cal Poly Humboldt facilitated by article co-authors Lisa, Nicolette and Kerry. Jill and Beth reflect on how they learned to write and teach writing in their disciplines, and how they are currently thinking about and teaching language, writing and assessment as instructors in their fields.
Jill’s reflection

My journey of learning to write within my discipline was sink or swim. In courses, I predominantly wrote in response to high stakes assignments. Occasionally, an instructor required peer feedback or an outline, but the writing I submitted was expected to be fully formed, final versions. There was not much emphasis on revision. My papers were returned to me marked up with the instructor’s colored pen of choice. Maybe we figured out what went wrong before we submitted the next paper and maybe we didn’t. I would visit a professor’s office hours to ask questions, of course, and they were happy to talk, but revision and review in advance of a “final” were not built into the writing process. Then there was the added expectation to write for peer-reviewed publications and the joy (sarcasm) of hearing from anonymous yet brutal reviewers (aka Reviewer 3). In my field, where qualitative, personalized work is not always valued, academic writing often means I need to adopt a robot voice: concise as possible and following a strict set of discoursal rules. Some of these are clearly defined (like English language mechanics) and others are still unwritten and unnamed, passed down in the culture of the field. If I’m reflecting honestly, I have internalized a (probably self-imposed) pressure to not make mistakes, to be deemed ‘good enough’ on the first try, and to essentially always write with the voice of Reviewer 3 in my head.

I also never received explicit or meaningful training about how to teach writing; I learned through modeling. I don’t mean to suggest I had bad models, simply that any training I had focused on rigid rules as well as on meeting long-established tenants of the discipline. I used these experiences (initially) to help me teach writing at Cal Poly Humboldt. How I “learned” to teach writing was to provide examples, but mostly to just throw the assignment out there, see what comes back, and then mark all over each paper. This process for teaching writing meant that I assumed students would read my comments and corrections, yet I didn’t yet know how to structure purposeful engagement with writing as part of an iterative process.

After attending professional development on equitable approaches to teaching writing, I learned, generally, that writing is connected to lived experience. Writing instruction can provide opportunities to invite students in, to help them find connections to the field. I also learned that writing—as an expression of the self—is not simply reserved for “creative” writing situations but can be tapped in all its forms. My developing understandings have led me to ask questions about how writing works in my field, and I have noticed unnecessary boundaries for writing that keep students from accessing connection points to the discipline. My questions have become: how do I foster a balance between meeting the essentials of the discipline, of being able to speak the field’s language, alongside supporting students to find connection points? I have asked myself: Why not start with connection and then scaffold in disciplinary rules and mechanics? Why centralize mechanics so much that students’ connections to the discipline get lost? I now think that putting “rules” first creates a risk where students, as future leaders in the field, can no longer see a place for them in it, where strict structures of writing are, intentionally or not, holding a door open for people to leave a field that needs them. My takeaways from professional development in writing have led to fundamental shifts in how I view it. I now see writing holistically. These meetings were, honestly, the first times I had ever really thought about the potential of writing as an inclusive practice.

As a kinesiology and public health professional, I have lived in the world of academic-based writing and writing for public audiences (e.g. infographics, health promotion program materials, etc.). While these formats, intellectually, have always counted as writing, students’ work to create them has not been valued at the same level as “academic” texts. I’d like to see how assessment or evaluation of all of the texts students create in these programs might change to respond to students’ labor and efforts. At this point, I am also viewing writing as not simply as an end product but as a process for thinking. I more frequently use writing to engage students in thought exploration and finding connections to content, for engaging students in collaborative critical thinking, and for reflection on their way toward a final product.
In the past, I also required rough and final drafts as components of writing assignments, including peer review (e.g., students would swap papers and provide written feedback to each other). These processes are good, but I learned in the FLC that the writing process and writing assessment can be much more thoughtful and dynamic. In the FLC, for example, we explored a peer review process where students pose questions to the group that they find themselves grappling with while writing. In implementing this approach in my classes, students reported that this process was much more meaningful for them than other peer-review processes we had tried, and that they took away not only editing suggestions but also different viewpoints to consider and critical feedback for moving forward.

These and other new approaches toward writing instruction have shifted how I think about grading and assessment, and how I approach writing as an engagement tool. In the health promotion field, we need folks to be able to create materials that will reach and connect with different groups of people in the general population. At the same time, the field also requires folks to be able to write in formal language as expected in grant or program proposals. Students need to experiment with what it means to write for these different audiences, but a strict separation of language approaches for different audiences may not always be so necessary. While the use of “professional language” is an integral part of working in my field, how assignments invite students to convey professional concepts can happen through multiple language styles and approaches. I now check my lens when I review students’ work; I step back and ask myself which kinds of corrections and feedback will best support each student’s development as writer and a learner, and whether or not any of my feedback might be unconsciously coming from the strict writing style ingrained in me during my own education. Separating out these elements has created more room for me to engage with students about their writing and their connection to the content, the field, and their peers.

Moving forward, I hope to learn more about writing across the curriculum and would like to see how these processes can be explored within programs. This might be especially tricky when faculty have different areas of expertise within a program and may have different values and constructions of what they think is important for writing success in the major.

Beth’s reflection

I learned most about how to write in my discipline during graduate school. Before graduate school, my father commented on his surprise that my ability to communicate in writing did not live up to my verbal ability. Early in my graduate program, I learned that my advisor also did not think I wrote very well. So I did not have a lot of confidence in my writing abilities in graduate school—at least at the beginning.

Many of my advisor’s courses had large reading packets that had many of her papers in them. I learned a lot from reading her writing, as well as from other papers, about what content and tone is expected in a journal article. Reading my advisor’s papers impressed upon me, for example, how important it is in the introduction and the literature review to carve out a place where one’s work contributes to the literature, to show that no one else has made the same contribution and why the contribution is important. My writing was pretty rough until I developed an editor’s voice about my own work, which happened through editing other people’s writing. Once I got better at explaining why something did not make sense to me, then I became more skilled at editing my own work.

I do not remember teaching writing before I was hired at Humboldt in January of 1995 as an assistant professor of engineering. The first course where I taught technical writing was for first-semester, first-year students in ENGR 115: Introduction to Design. The students wrote large reports in groups which included five major sections submitted over the course of the semester. Students received both formative and summative assessments for their reports. At the end of the project, their “clients” received their final reports and I graded those. I was provided a pre-existing departmental rubric for grading, but I also developed a set of codes for helping students improve their technical writing skills.

Given my own challenges with learning technical writing, when I first started to teach it, I looked hard for
ways to help them. I found a technical writing text that had helpful hints which I shared with students. I also shared and continue to share “The Science of Scientific Writing” (Gopen and Swan 1990), which I used in graduate school (Some students have exclaimed, “Why didn’t you share this with me earlier!”).

In our department, we had developed a framework for writing during the late 1990s when our program learned—from alumni surveys—that we were not teaching technical writing well. We learned that students received lots of feedback on final drafts, but they were not provided an opportunity to review feedback and implement it in advance of those final drafts. Some engineering students study engineering partly because they do not like to write. I often share with them that “you can have the greatest idea, but if no one else can understand your idea, it cannot be implemented.” Though I was already a believer in peer review and I understood that humans share and create knowledge through writing, the FLC sessions reinforced the value of feedback, peer review, teaching writing as knowledge creation.

Genre knowledge is a concept that I am still in the process of understanding. Through my own emerging understandings of genre, I feel I have better structures to explain to my students the reasons for learning a particular genre and why it will serve them to do so. The concept of genre also helps me explain the distinct parts of a particular text. The importance of providing example documents has also been reinforced for me. I was providing examples before, but now have deeper understandings of why examples are useful to students and how to make them useful.

I am still grappling with how to dismantle white supremacy within the writing in my discipline. I am not yet sure what that looks like. Simple ideas come to mind: allowing documents to be written in multiple languages or multiple versions of English. I think I am just beginning to think about “what counts as language” in ENGR. I still suggest that students revise their work to use different words that are more precise or concise. This means I am still pushing the values of concision and precision in technical writing, which also means I am still grappling with how to address and transform white supremacy in writing instruction.

The idea of grading for labor and not on final “quality” is another idea that I am still chewing on (I put “quality” in quotes, because it could be that “quality” is infused with white supremacist notions, or that a student comes into my class writing well, and no “quality” is added by my instruction or assignments). One of our readings in the FLC was about “ungrading” (Heikkinen 2022). The article describes how an instructor’s grading system changed to center what students learned as writers in his class, and not on how well they could write before they came into it. The students earned higher grades overall after he made this shift, but he also felt he had honestly assessed students on what they had learned during the term. I would like to get better at assessing students on what they have learned as writers in my classes, and not so much on how well they write in the first place. I now provide ungraded feedback on drafts and encourage students to reach a minimum standard on the first draft. Then, I work with them to extend ideas on each subsequent draft. As a result, I am seeing students earn higher grades in the end.

I am interested in the most effective way to help students learn to improve their writing. To me “effective” means that I use strategies for teaching writing that are both efficient for me as an instructor but also support students’ growth as writers. So I wonder: What does the research say? What types of developmental models are there for technical writing development? Do they exist? Are they worth considering?

Reframing What Counts: Writing Instruction in the Culturally Sustaining HSI

Perhaps as you’ve read this text and these reflections, you’ve explored your own memories about how you learned to write or your multiple and varied literacies and how they developed. You likely have beliefs about what literacy is (in your discipline and otherwise) and how humans become literate over time and across situations. These ideas and beliefs come from schooling, reading, professional experiences, discussions, research, social groups, family, and the systems that conscribe or inform them. In Jill and Beth’s reflections, we see the
ways that complex webs regarding expectations, genres, affordances, dispositions, and beliefs and values about writing take shape across their experiences as writers and teachers of writing. We see Jill and Beth thinking hard about writing and literacy development in their disciplines. Their reflections tell us how they are thinking about what counts as literacy in their disciplines. What is less visible in these reflections—though they are there—is how these instructors’ disciplines have privileged (and still privilege) white ways of knowing. In Jill’s reflection, she discusses the pressure of meeting the requirement of polished, perfect texts in her graduate program; and, in Beth’s, she interrogates the concept of writing “quality” and how that has been constructed in her field and, therefore, in the assignments she’s designed. These reflections illustrate Jill’s and Beth’s thoughts about teaching writing, but they are also about their identities as writers. They illuminate that our literacies are personal. They are also cultural, social and epistemological.

CSP provides instructors with a framework for understanding literacy as a cultural, social, and epistemological phenomenon. CSP-informed teaching makes visible the idea that literacy involves more than just writing, that it is infinitely more dynamic than one (white, dominant) way of knowing and communicating.

To close this article, we gesture toward hope: hope that readers feel connected to and challenged by the ideas and practices posed in this article; hope that readers seek out and experiment with ways to center their students’ multilingual and multiliterate ways of knowing in their writing and their lives; hope that instructors collaborate with their students and their colleagues about their successes and (creative) failures toward equitable writing instruction, and hope that all students learn in culturally sustaining ways. So, some questions for all readers (and not only instructors): How do your beliefs about literacy play out in the ways you think about teaching and disciplinary learning in the polytechnic HSI? How can instructors support students’ diverse and varied literacies in ways that sustain them? How can instructors resist and critically address white institutional presence in writing instruction and assessment? How can instructors center students’ multiliteracies?

At Cal Poly Humboldt, these questions can help instructor critically and meaningfully respond to institutional mandates related to educating and graduating a diverse body of students and the imperative to create new polytechnic programs. Enriquez-Loya and Leon challenge “all individuals [at the HSI] to break molds and build alliances through shared knowledge and to create community within academic and localized spaces” (2017: 214). Pedagogical frameworks like CSP (and other) equitable approaches to language and writing support knowledge-sharing and community-building across perspectives and experiences, but they cannot by themselves dismantle the racialized structure of the institution. In order to stay connected to the ongoing project of antiracism, instructors must see literacy and language use in all of their negotiated complexities and in ways that move beyond the classroom. Historic and recurrent English-only movements, attacks against public libraries, book and curriculum bans, and ongoing efforts toward voter suppression illuminate critically conscious understandings of literacy as central to human rights. The politics of writing are not only linguistic.

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