Black Youth Employ African American Vernacular English in Creating Digital Texts

Darryl Ted Hall The Ohio State University
James Damico Indiana University, Bloomington

This study addressed the use of African American Vernacular English among a group of urban secondary school students who participated in a digital media course as part of a pre-college summer enrichment program. Using theories of African American language and culturally relevant pedagogy, the analysis revealed four features of African American Vernacular English: tonal semantics, sermonic tone, call and response, and signifying which were evident in a digital text created by students. Findings from this study pointed to the utility and significance of creating culturally relevant spaces for technology teaching and learning, and the production of digital text. These findings also informed efforts to reduce the digital divide among African American students.

One of the most significant Federal court battles of the latter part of the 20th century, Brown v Board of Education (1954) involved access to literacy for African Americans (Gates, 1999). Throughout American history, access to literacy has often come through both legal and personal struggles by African American people. Laws were enacted that made it a crime for enslaved Africans to read and write (Gates, 1999). However, slave narratives described how slaves risked being punished with whippings, amputations, and even violent deaths in their desire to become literate (Perry, Steel, & Hilliard, 2004). As a result, access to literacy became a hallmark of the slave’s humanity and an instrument of liberation (Gates, 1999).

African Americans have always striven to become literate people using whatever forms of communication were available. When written communication was illegal, African American slaves creatively used songs and rhetoric in the fields and in churches to communicate (Banks, 2005). In contemporary society, multimedia technologies have created new modes of communication and African Americans bring that same creativity, culture, and historical experience to their use of communication using multimedia technology. Through television, radio, and the Internet, the African American cultural experience is revealed not only to other African Americans, but it is also communicated to a diverse global world.

Contemporary literacy struggles for African Americans involve accessing emergent technologies and bridging the “digital divide” or difference in access and use of digital technology between White communities and communities of color, especially African American communities. Because lower rates of computer use by African Americans can be correlated to higher rates of poverty and lower levels of education (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2000), the need to bridge this digital divide and the resultant academic and economic gaps between Caucasian students and African American students remains urgent. African Americans need access to meaningful and enriched opportunities with the extensive resources that multimedia technology offers. Access to these resources also needs to coincide with culturally relevant curricular and pedagogical approaches, where African American youth can draw from their own rich cultural contexts and experiences that define their place in the world (Gates, 1999).

This research study addresses issues of access and culturally relevant experiences with technology for African Americans by considering a group of African American secondary school...
students who participated in a digital media course as part of a pre-college summer program. Using theories of African American language and culturally relevant pedagogy, this article examines four aspects of African American Vernacular English (AAVE): tonal semantics, sermonic tone, call and response, and signifying (Smitherman, 2000) that were evident in the students’ digital text productions. Findings from this study point to the usefulness and significance of creating culturally relevant spaces for technology teaching and learning and the production of digital text. The findings also inform efforts to reduce the digital divide.

**African American Language**

The use of African American language provides a framework to examine historical and cultural experiences and writing with digital tools. Researchers have made explicit both the systematic features of African American English (AAE) or AAVE (Baugh, 1983; Smitherman, 1977) and the African origins of its syntax, phonology, and lexicon (Rickford, 1999). The significance of AAVE is rooted in the identity, survival, and struggle of Black people. Smitherman (2000) makes this point when he asserted that there are “many facets of the oral tradition as this seemingly disparate Black group as preachers and poets, bluesmen, and Gospel-ettes, testifiers and toast-tellers, reverends and revolutionaries (p. 201).” The historical continuity of AAVE has been celebrated in African literature and popular culture. Lee (2003) suggests that the works of great authors such as Langston Hughes, Sonia Sanchez, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Zora Neale Hurston are examples of AAVE in literature that are now considered classics in African American traditions. Moreover, AAVE has been commodified in the marketplace and reified across the generations through music (Lee, 2003; Smitherman, 1977). Its contemporary use in mainstream speech by African American youth makes us aware of how the “structural underpinnings of the oral tradition remain basically intact even as each new generation makes verbal adaptations within the tradition” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 199). Smitherman identifies some of the structural underpinnings of AAVE such as “call and response, mimicry, signifying, testifying, exaggerated language, proverbial statements, code-switching, mimicking, and tonal semantics” (2000, p. 217). The more current verbal adaptations of these modes are present in the textual productions of contemporary African American literacy and multimedia technology.

**Literacy and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Researchers, especially those operating from sociocultural perspectives of literacy and literacy learning (e.g., Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Lee, 2003; New London Group, 2000; Street, 1984, 1995) have broadened conceptions of literacy from sets of universal and neutral skills (an autonomous model) to viewing literacy as contextualized and culturally shaped social practices—an ideological model (Street, 2003). This shift aligns with theories and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy, which validate and affirm the “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). With a culturally relevant stance and approach, students have opportunities to draw on their cultural knowledge and resources to facilitate more relevant and useful learning experiences (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Nieto, 2002). African American students may access various forms of their own cultural knowledge to demonstrate their capacities and skills as readers and writers in settings both inside and outside of school (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Mahiri, 2004). They can use images, ideas, and practices of popular culture to support and enhance their literacy learning (Dyson, 1997; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

Based on a summary of research from sociocultural perspectives, Lee (1993) offered the following set of propositions that can help further frame culturally relevant pedagogy and practices for solving problems. Firstly, she proposed that through real world problem-solving, rather than school-based tasks, students are forced to adapt to using multiple strategies to meet the limits of the situation. Secondly, thinking or cognition is distributed and interacted across more than one person, reflecting a shared process of problem-solving (Solomon, 1993). Thirdly, she
affirmed that everyday tasks for students require complex cognitions that draw on discipline-based knowledge, such as reading, mathematics, and science. Finally, she highlighted the complex interrelationship between school-based disciplinary knowledge and everyday knowledge across multiple cultural contexts.

These core propositions align with principles and goals of culturally relevant pedagogy. A culturally relevant framework attributes significance to the everyday contexts of students' lives, particularly students of color, such as African American, Native American, and Latino youth, and carefully examines the indigenous cultural practices by acknowledging and valuing these practices as building on students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Based on the view that culture-specific communication practices and routine shared activities in the home are potentially rich intellectual sources for learning (Lee, Mendenhall, Rivers, & Tynes, 1999; Smitherman, 2000), educators need to find authentic, meaningful ways to integrate these cultural practices into the curriculum. This involves the engagement of peers with opportunities for sharing and creating knowledge with print-based and digital forms of literacy.

**Culturally Relevant Digital Texts**

While educators have begun to enact culturally responsive approaches in literature selections, and writing and reading activities for students (Lee, 2003), little is known about how students draw on their robust cultural and linguistic knowledge to shape the ways they produce texts in a digital format. One notable exception is the work of Glynda Hull (2003) and the Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth (DUSTY) project. Situated in Oakland, California with a large proportion of African American participants, DUSTY was designed to be "a mechanism for making powerful forms of signification (tools for and practices of digital multimodal composing) available to children and adults who didn't otherwise have such access at home or at school" (Hull & Nelson, 2005, p. 230).

The digital storytelling in the DUSTY project is a complex multimedia form where youth use text, images, and video clips to create their own stories. Hull and Nelson (2005) offered a careful analysis of one digital story created by a DUSTY participant, who used still images, music, and an original spoken word poem to create a digital text called "Lyfe-N-Rhyme" that functioned as autobiographical narrative and social critique. Hull and Nelson (2005) also presented a careful multimodal analysis of this single digital text, revealing the sophisticated literacy practices embedded in the text.

This article employs a similar approach to examine how a group of African American youth in a summer program accessed and used particular aspects of AAVE in composing digital texts with iMovie video editing software (Apple, Inc., 2006) for personal stories in computer-generated movies. While Hull and Nelson (2005) used semiotics and multimodal communication as analytic lenses, the research design of this study focuses on four linguistic modes of AAVE to better understand the ways the youth accessed and used their linguistic resources and knowledge in constructing their digital texts.

**Methods**

This qualitative study was designed to understand how a group of students in a summer program used AAVE in the production of digital texts. As part of a pre-college summer program, the technology instructor taught a digital media course to 91 African American male and female high school students in tenth through twelfth grades. The course was aligned with the International Society for Technology in Education's (ISTE, 2000) *Standards and Profiles for Technology-Literate Students: Performance Indicators, Curriculum Examples, and Scenarios* for students in grades 9-12. The primary goal of this course was for students to engage meaningfully with technology to create digital texts about topics that interested them. Students worked in groups of four or five to make multimedia movies (i.e., iMovies) and were encouraged to explore a social justice problem related to their respective communities. The teaching framework was designed to
help students learn to use technology within the context of culturally relevant and authentic learning activities, rather than decontextualized skill-based activities.

The instructional leader of this program guided the students toward the creation of their own digital texts. He began by showing them different multimedia texts, including Web sites, videos, and digital video discs (DVDs), to discuss the composing options the student authors would have. For example, he engaged the students in a discussion of contemporary cultural relevant Web sites (e.g., www.africanacana.com; www.vibe.com) to consider how culture plays a part in the choices that authors or creators of Web sites made. Students discussed the Web designers’ choices and questioned what audience they were targeting by gender, age, and other subgroup categories. For example, students surmised that a contemporary music urban hip-hop Web site was created to appeal to African American teenage girls due to the representation and proliferation of male hip-hop artists on the site.

Students varied in their approaches when it came to making their own design choices with the texts that they were creating (students either created Web sites or movies). For instance, some students working on movies chose to develop their story plots in full and then record the movies, while others decided to write and record scene by scene. Additionally, students spent considerable time working with their assigned group discussing and deliberating their story plots, storyboarding, filming, digitizing, editing, revising, and soliciting feedback. The instructor provided students with examples of digital movies as well as technical support and general feedback on their projects. However, students were encouraged to consult within their groups and with other groups for critical feedback. As the summer progressed and students became more proficient and worked independently on different parts of the project, they decided (without receiving any feedback from the instructor) the order for the edited video clips, and other details, such as titles, themes, sound effects, transitions and ending credits.

While twelve different groups of students participated in the summer course (eight groups created Web sites and four created digital movies) for this particular study, the digital text of one group was selected for analysis through a process of purposeful and dialectical selection (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This group was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the students in this group had varying levels of writing skills and varying levels of technology expertise. This was based on the self-report from an informal survey as well as observations of a series of informal writing and multimedia technology assignments during the early stages of their participation in the program. Each student brought rich perspectives, talents, and practices that revealed the cultural influences in their lives to the research setting. Three of the students in the group were outspoken and their opinions were easily determined. However, one student was quieter and sometimes required a one-on-one interaction to encourage her to communicate. Although some of the students required additional time or different approaches than others during the course, they all provided insightful, clear perceptions and emotionally intense opinions in their digital texts.

The digital text that this group created was a video that focused on gender identity for high school students. It included artifacts that were clear examples of their cultural context. They referred to an article on a popular contemporary hip-hop music artist who had described the hip-hop community as negative toward gender identity and sexual lifestyle choices. This inspired the group to create a message for a universal peer audience regarding tolerance for differences in gender and sexual identity.

While many modes of discourse are significant and can be found in the digital text, analysis in this study centers on four salient features of AAVE in students’ digital texts: tonal semantics, sermonic tone, call and response, and signifying. The analysis reveals the rich ways this group of African American youth mobilized their linguistic and cultural knowledge through these discourse modes as they composed a digital text.
ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE MODES

Tonal Semantics

Tonal semantics depict the ways that intonation in a word or a phrase can alter its meaning (Banks, 2005). The speaker’s tone changes the meanings of words or phrases by giving meaning and rhetorical capital. The interpretation of the communication could be perceived either positively or negatively by triggering a familiar chord in the listeners’ ear and the ability to make words sound more pleasant or disagreeable. For example, there are different pronunciations of the word “police” that display different tonal semantics. When it is pronounced in the typical iambic pattern of English language (i.e., pə-lēz’) it has a different meaning that when dramatic emphasis is given to the first syllable, (i.e., pō’-lēz). Additionally, tonal semantics are expressed by altering spellings of words to alter tone or pitch, by shortening or elongating them to affect duration and pitch (Banks, 2005). Popular culture can also serve as a source for tonal semantics when African American youth appropriate the comedic character voices of well-known African American personalities such as Bill Cosby (Banks, 2005). The students used tonal semantics in several instances in creating their digital stories. The following passage between three female students (pseudonyms used) demonstrates this point:

Charlotte: Girl, that looks like our friend Sky.
Jolene: Girl, that is Sky.
Charlotte and Jolene: Hello, Sky
Jolene: You look so nice, Sky
Serena: Girl, Please I am big as a house.

Notice the emphasis placed on the words hello and please. For example, the word “please” (i.e., “plēz”) was pronounced to change emphasis and meaning in two ways. With dramatic emphasis on the first part of the word, it changed into two syllables (“plē-ez”). The meaning has also changed and understood by her peer to mean “not really.” Students consistently used language in these ways throughout their digital text (e.g., “what” (wot to w’-ot) and “for real” (fôr rîl to fôr- rî’ol).

Sermonic Tone

Another discourse mode, sermonic tone, is often identified with Black preachers and churches, which have been crucial in the development of African American public leaders (Smitherman, 2000). The manner in which a Black preacher integrates his or her sermonic tone can claim authority and the permission to speak on a subject he or she views with significance (Banks, 2005). African American writers such as James Baldwin in Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) and Richard Wright in Black Boy (1945/1993) effectively invoke the sermonic tone of the Black church (Lee, 2003). The sermonic tone of a phrase can be illustrated with a parable, fable, or without any story at all to illustrate an implied moral. Many times statements using sermonic tone are made using an elevated voice register to heighten the effect (Banks, 2005; Smitherman, 2000). Much of what is conveyed is through the speaker’s attitude. When sermonic tone is used, the speaker presents himself or herself as a self-appointed preacher. While the preaching style and leadership in the Black church and community has historically been male, increasingly more females are contemporary preachers and leaders (Banks, 2005). Sermonic tone has always been available and employed by both genders, especially outside the church setting, to convey strong attitudes and moral meaning.

The students in this group drew on sermonic tones in creative ways for their digital text. Rather than use individual speeches emblematic of the African American rhetorical tradition linked to the Black church, these young script writers created dialogues with sermonic tones that conveyed the importance of a peer-shared experience for cultural knowledge and understanding. The following exchange among three female students demonstrates this point:
Jolene: Girl, you look like you pregnant.
Serena: I am and I don’t know what to do.
Jolene: My sister was in the same situation. She got pregnant by someone when she had just started high school, and she just didn’t know what to do, but I know exactly what you need to do. You need support and the best way to get this is by getting down with this new community program called Teens for Pregnancy.
Charlotte: Yeah, I agree with her, you gotta get support, so you down wit it.

It is interesting to note how Jolene assumes the role of an authoritarian and offers advice. She asserted, “I know exactly what you need to do.” She also used a form of storytelling to support her point of being an expert on the subject. Both of these are examples of rhetorical tropes used within the Black church.

**Call and Response**

The use of call and response is a well-known rhetorical trope within AAVE. It is a rhetorical relationship in which the statements (calls) from the speaker are affirmed by expressions (responses) from the listener (Smitherman, 1977). Its use is evident between speakers and listeners as well between speakers and responding audience members. She suggests that the interplay between the speaker and listener reaffirms what has been said. This rhetorical interplay is commonly witnessed in the Black church. For example, when the preacher says, “Can I get a witness?” and the church responds, “Amen.” Foster (1989) asserted that “responses can follow from a speaker specifically requesting them or eliciting them by manipulating their own discourse, or they can be unsolicited and spontaneously interjected into the ongoing interaction” (p. 2). Call and response has a long history within African American music. In jazz music, a call and response is a succession of two distinct phrases usually played by different musicians, where the second phrase is heard as a direct commentary on or response to the first. It corresponds to the call-and-response pattern in human communication. Jazz, rooted in African music technique and theory, is marked by call and response (Smitherman, 2000).

The students used call and response more often than any other discourse mode. The following exchange among female students demonstrates this point:

Jolene: That is a fly shirt
Charlotte: That is fly
Jolene: I would love to have that myself
Charlotte: I know that’s right
Serena: Yeah you know it is fly

In the previous passage, Charlotte agrees with Jolene that the shirt looks nice (“fly”). Charlotte does it in a manner that is similar to seconding a motion: “I know that’s right.” Charlotte follows up again and confirms the shirt is nice looking enough that she would wear it. Finally, Serena, who was actually wearing the shirt, expresses her own thoughts about the shirt. This demonstrates the girls’ reaffirmation of one another’s comments.

**Signifying**

Signifying is a traditional form of African American discourse familiar to the African American community across class, gender, and generations in urban and suburban environments (Gates, 1988; Lee, 1993). It is a coded way of using language or double talk (Smitherman, 1977). In this mode of discourse, one word preserves its original meaning, while there is another oppositional layer of meaning over it. Theoretically, signifying as a concept can be used to give meaning to theoretical acts of African Americans and to indicate a Black presence. Rhetorically, one can also explore texts for the manner in which the themes or world views of other texts are repeated and revised with a signal difference, but based on shared knowledge. When signifying, the word can provide both literal and figurative interpretations. Lee (1993) suggested that signifying within the
African American community “means to speak with innuendo and double meanings, to play rhetorically upon the meaning and sounds of words, to be quick and often witty in one’s response” (p. 11). Signifying has been used in both rhetoric as well as African American literature with distinctions between signifying as a rhetorical and literal device.

The students used signifying several times in their digital movie. The following passage between two female students provides one example:

Jolene: Let’s get outta here.
Charlotte: You hungry?
Jolene: Yeah a little bit... other than this morning, I ain’t eatin’ nothing all day.
Charlotte: Let’s get something out of the vending machines because I ain’t eatin’ nothing since this morning, and I’m starvin’ too.

In other words, by Jolene indicating that she had something to eat earlier that day, she figuratively meant that she had not eaten “all day.” The idea expressed is that Jolene is really hungry. Charlotte expressed the same idea; she indicated that she ate earlier, but suggests that she is starving. The shared knowledge among each of them rests in the urgency of the moment, which is to quickly find something to eat.

CONCLUSION

While the students’ digital text represented each of the four discourse modes, there were more instances of call and response and signifying than tonal semantics and sermonic tone. One explanation for this is that call and response and signifying are more common in popular culture and media. Students used peer characters rather than authoritarian figures to write call and response formats in their movie scripts, an approach familiar to African American adolescents as consumers of contemporary music and commercial media. Moreover, signifying is especially important as a rhetorical device for written and oral forms of African American communication. The ability to use it is based on one’s prior social knowledge and cultural codes (Lee, 1993). Although signifying is a way of encoding a message, it is one’s shared cultural knowledge that forms the basis on which any reinterpretation of the message is eventually made.

This study makes explicit the ways a group of African American adolescents claimed a sense of textual ownership by using four discourse modes in complex ways to represent ideas and shared knowledge within a digital space. Given an understanding that students’ identities are shaped by peers as they participate within a particular sociocultural context and form social codes that are unique to their own social worlds, this study highlights how a culturally relevant environment helped African American youth draw on cultural and linguistic resources and practices in their use of multimedia technology. As they created a digital text, there was evidence of rule-governed and systematic discourse modes reminiscent of historical and cultural communication practices originally witnessed in Black communities and churches.

Whereas it has been argued that the “underground” African American cultural context has become so mainstream through exposure in contemporary media telecommunications (e.g., hip-hop music, cable television, and the Internet), it is no longer metaphorically “underground” (Banks, 2005). There is, however, still culturally relevant underground knowledge not evidenced in the media, and this can shape the ways one thinks programmatically about culture and technology. Understanding the cultural context and worldview that affect digital text among African American youth reveal the processes that underlie their multimedia technology use, and uncovering these culturally relevant factors suggests interventions to reduce the digital divide. For example, African American youth could benefit from culturally relevant multimedia technology experiences to increase their use and skill level.

As effective solutions to reduce the digital divide are sought, it is clear that economic resources are only one of the many factors that play a role. This research study suggests that an effective way to engage African American adolescents in multimedia technology use is to create a socially and culturally relevant space where they have instruction with peers and the freedom to
build from their own frameworks. The digital text analyzed in this study demonstrates the effective use by African American students to convey meaning and knowledge within a cultural context. While public telecommunications already reveal and disseminate many aspects of African American culture, there is still much that is underground that needs to rise to "higher ground" where it can be used to promote positive change and reduce the digital divide.

Historically, a primary means for African Americans to share experiences and teach one another from generation to generation came through the passing down of oral stories and songs. While these culturally and linguistically rich practices will continue, the digital texts of today will also serve a similar purpose. Creating and producing digital texts provide opportunities for African American children and youth to be seekers, speakers, listeners, and translators of the values of their own unique historical culture (Jackson & Richardson, 2003), as they archive multimedia videos, Web pages, and Internet conversations to document and preserve African American history and culture.

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**AUTHORS**

DARYYL TED HALL is Assistant Professor of Technologies, School of Education Policy and Leadership, The Ohio State University, Columbus.

JAMES DAMICO is Assistant Professor of Literacy and Language Education, Indiana University, Bloomington.

All queries and comments regarding this article should be addressed to hall.1089@osu.edu