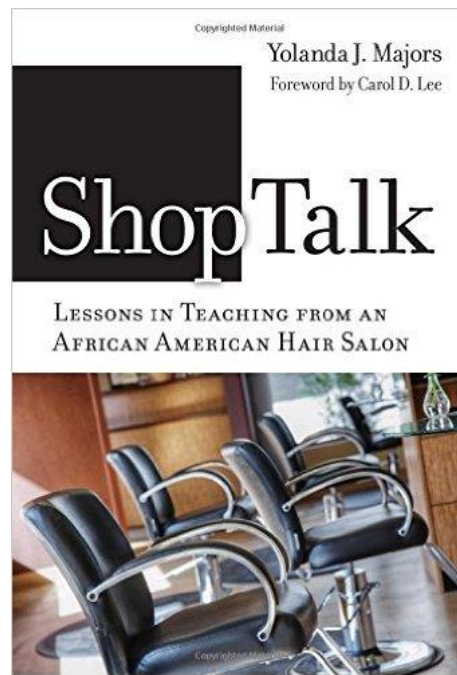


Review of *Shoptalk: Lessons in Teaching from an African American Hair Salon*

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Majors, Y. J. (2015). *Shoptalk: Lessons in teaching from an African American hair salon*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

ISBN 978-0-8077-5661-4 (paperback)

ISBN 978-0-8077-5662-1 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-8077-7383-3 (ebook)

Pages: 192

In *Shoptalk: Lessons in Teaching from an African American Hair Salon*, Yolanda J. Majors synthesizes research, teaching, a lot of hard thinking, and reflection following six years of research she conducted in four hair salons in the Midwestern and the Southern U.S. Based on what she learned about how argumentative discourse is constructed during informal conversations among African American women as they gathered in the social setting of the salon, she developed a *shoptalk pedagogy* for teaching literary analysis and argumentation in the Chicago neighborhood in which she had grown up, the West side area known as North Lawndale. This book thus both seeks to document the discourse practices found in a key site for gathering among African American women, and to apply that knowledge to instruction of urban African American students.

Carol D. Lee's Foreword to the book locates this study in the tradition of Heath's (1983) community ethnography, Goodwin's (1990) study of children's street games, and Rose's (2004) study of workplace cognition. I would add Moll's (e.g., González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) studies of Tucson-area Latin@ immigrant community literacy and its disjuncture with school-based learning assessments, and Cushman's (1998) ethnography of indigent Black Cherokee families' navigation of the public housing bureaucracy to the body of work to which Majors' research is related. In all of these studies, the researchers begin with the cultural practices of people considered to be disenfranchised, and in so doing, detail the sophisticated uses of speech, performance, collaborative argumentation, and other facets of local literacy practices through which individuals and collectives make sense of their worlds, construct empowered identities, and talk back to their oppressors.

What these studies share is an ethnographic approach to understanding how minoritized community members engage in both speech and other social practices in traversing the complexities of their challenging worlds—challenging, I say, because the minoritized people are often constructed from without as object, impoverished, pathologized, and in deficit to the norms of middle class society as defined by affluent Whites. This field of ethnographic studies has documented in

great detail the literate lives of those presumed by society at large to lack intelligence and social value.

Kirkland (2014) has convincingly demonstrated how using invalid research methods tends to pathologize Black youth, finding that two very different paradigms—standardized school assessments of literacy, and community-based ethnographies—come to polar opposite conclusions about their achievement and potential. School achievement gets measured in single-sitting examinations based on problems posed by test-makers, with scores computed for statistical manipulation and students measured against either criteria (often based on middle-class assumptions) or norms derived from the whole testing population, which is skewed in favor of the middle class.

In contrast, community ethnographies provide detailed documentation of social, emotional, and cognitive processes through which self-chosen literacy goals are pursued over time by small subsets of people with the assistance of feedback, affirmation, critique, and other forms of response and encouragement. Such ethnographic studies of Black students' literacy activities focus on authentic, meaningful processes and products—e.g., their participation in spoken word performances—and find that literacy achievement is high, sustained, and of great social value. These literacy practices are characterized by social, performative dimensions and the collaborative construction of meaning.

School assessment, in contrast, requires a solitary, detached approach to answering a battery of questions with correct answers as determined by the psychometrician who designed them, under the assumption that such factors as poverty are irrelevant. In *shoptalk*, however, the issue of poverty is often foregrounded as a problem to be understood and solved, not assumed to be irrelevant. As Kirkland's (2014) review of ethnographic studies that take context into account demonstrate, literacy practices and tasks are situated and constructed and not amenable to standardized treatment. Majors's work falls within this ethnographic tradition, seeking to understand the discourse practices in which Black women

engage as a way to consider pedagogies that might engage students who share their backgrounds.

The African American Hair Salon as Ethnographic Research Site

The hair salon is one site of gathering in which resistance to bias is asserted. The film *Barbershop* (Story, 2002) and its sequel, televised spinoff, and planned third film have helped the broader public to see [the manner in which the African American hair cutting and styling shop provides the forum in which politics, culture, romance, racial matters, and other issues are discussed in urban neighborhoods](#). The spinoff film *Beauty Shop* (Woodruff, 2005) further situates Black discourse in the setting of the women's salon. As one who herself had accompanied her mother on her trips to the salon during childhood, Majors had become acculturated early in life to the role that salon shoptalk plays in the lives of both stylists and customers in their social construction of their lives.

In *Shoptalk*, Majors returns to a variety of hair salons to study in detail how the women engage with one another in considering the issues they face and their response to a world that approaches them warily and with misunderstanding. As Majors frames her project,

This book, in part, is about how people . . . talk to one another in the African American hair salon. It documents the encounters they share, the identities they resist and create, the literate skills they display in doing so, and the lessons learned from their collective and complex social readings of the world. It is about talk as performative discourse, where clients, beauticians, and other community members act out skillful, culturally scripted roles for their and others' benefit. (pp. 2-3)

She continues, referring to the salon as an intellectual arena in which problem-posing and problem-solving are undertaken as the participants produce "an interpretive narrative critical of the world and the group" that provides the text through which further action becomes available (p.

3). Shoptalk thus has a sharply political edge, drawing on immediate life challenges for material and, as detailed next, relying on conventions of African American English (AAE) for force and emphasis.

Shoptalk as African American Discourse Genre

Early on in the volume, Majors characterizes shoptalk as "a specific genre of conversational discourse through which teaching and learning are mediated in the context of the hair salon" (p. 24; emphasis in original). She then lists the major features of shoptalk, which may also emerge in other public spaces populated by African Americans. Shoptalk involves

- Publicly performed, private conversations occurring in culturally shared situated sites of labor
- A sharing of personal experience often in narrative form
- Speakers evoking a certain image and assuming roles before an audience
- Talk functioning as a prescriptive tool, allowing the stylists to treat their clients' psychological and aesthetic needs
- Engaging forms of talk being communicated through AAE discourse norms ([call and response](#), [signifying](#), [narrative argumentation](#)) [links added]
- Oral narratives of personal experience and storytelling produced and interpreted through "acting" participants, generally for the purpose of providing resources, problem solving, and/or building knowledge
- Participants holding participation status as speakers and hearers within the participation framework (p. 24)

Shoptalk is thus "the process by which speakers engage with one another in problem-solving tasks and transform in/through their participation" (p. 24). This critical approach involves the production of improvised, socially-reconstructed oral texts that offer participants "alternative, sometimes-competing mechanisms for a kind of cultural

consciousness, resiliency, and task-based problem solving” (p. 88). These processes often serve as a means of resistance to the constructions of African Americans in White society.

Majors identifies two goals for her volume: “(1) to illustrate, through empirical data, a kind of talk that occurs in the culturally shared spaces that African Americans occupy, and (2) to detail how, within such talk, teaching, learning, and identity work occur and the strategies that are involved in doing so” (p. 5). This shoptalk involves

- (1) A participatory role within that discourse that includes collaboration, cultural norms, and values;
- (2) a process of reasoning through goal-oriented tasks that involve collaboration and an examination of multiple and often divergent perspectives;
- and (3) an interactive form of reasoned argumentation and problem solving that is both socially and cognitively beneficial. (p. 5)

Shoptalk is thus not simply gabbing away while hair gets treated, shaped, and shorn. Rather, it involves a form of argumentation in a genre that is quite distinctive in form and participation practices. As Majors documents, argumentation about social issues occurs in a performative, interactional way in which the audience participates freely and actively, contributing to the lines of argumentation undertaken by the principal speaker. Bazerman and Paradis’s (1991) collection of essays on the ways in which argument is locally shaped is relevant to the unique ways in which different communities adapt [Toulmin’s \(1958\) basic argumentative form](#) to foreground particular aspects of how points are made and substantiated, and to infuse them with specific forms of emphasis. Just as literary critics and lawyers argue in distinctive ways, so do women in African American hair salons.

As Majors demonstrates, shoptalk’s argumentative processes do not resemble those found in the [essayist tradition](#) (Farr, 1993) upon which academic argumentation is founded. Rather, it derives from interactional styles commonly found among African Americans. [Think of the Black church](#), in

which the preacher continually implores the congregation to participate with greater energy with appeals such as “I can’t hear y’all!” should the pews become too quiet at any point. In many White churches ([with some exceptions](#)), the congregation only speaks when a formal opening appears in the script; the call-and-response character of Black churches would be inappropriate and a violation of form, [even as it is woven throughout many forms of African American artistic expression](#). Shoptalk thus might appear loud, rambunctious, and confrontational to outsiders accustomed to more muted approaches to public demeanor. For those whose lives have acculturated them to shoptalk as an established form of interaction, however, it provides the medium through which their reality is constructed, contested, and imagined in light of their vision of a satisfying social future.

Shoptalk therefore is not so much a unique, locally situated genre as an instance of African American discourse genres that are in practice across a range of settings. As such, it represents a form of racial socialization that includes “divine, affective-symbolic, and phenomenological strategies that protect youth from discriminatory and psychological antagonistic environments; that mediate racism stress; and that are related to closer and more protective family relationships” (p. 29), both within families and in centers of the local community. Majors emphasizes that for shoptalk to occur, participants “*transform* space for the purpose of enacting *a role* and constructing and or suspending *an identity* and conveying *a message*” (p. 32; emphasis in original). This notion of the importance of identity, in the unique setting of the hair salon, involves gaining an understanding of a client’s personality and internal profiles in order to construct an appropriate appearance, perhaps even shaping the hairstyle to project an identity not yet developed.

Within shoptalk the narrative takes on specific cultural traits. It is not a story told to a quiet audience. Rather, it is part of a dialogic group dynamic, one that, when undertaking resistance to discrimination, fosters self-affirmation and performs a contested identity. Audience participation grows in relation to cues provided by

the speaker, which may be verbal or signaled through body language, and resembles the call-and-response exchanges of the Black church service. In this fashion, a shoptalk narrative requires sophisticated intersubjectivity between individuals, and thus is a profoundly relational form of storytelling. It is collaboratively produced and relies on a sense of kinship that provides the means of affiliation for people who identify as African American. Furthermore, the narrative involves verbal playfulness and inventiveness, often relying on ironic poses and speech to convey a message.

One such form is [signifying](#), the verbal repartee that in some contexts may be viewed as inappropriate and even as a form of bullying (Rivers & Espelage, 2013). In the context of African American hair salons—and signifying’s impact on others is a function of context and relationships rather than a static effect—this form of interaction is neither bullying nor passing time (the options offered by Rivers & Espelage). Rather, it serves as a means of making critical points about society at large by those who in many ways have been disenfranchised within its confines. This form of narrative thus requires not just listening, but understanding how to read cues from the speaker and when and how to participate appropriately in the construction of the story. It also requires a fluid orientation to narration and the ability to shift in and out of roles as the circumstances suggest. As Majors phrases it, participation in this form of narrative requires cultural knowledge about “the receptive dimensions of engagement in literate practice: how people observe, listen, read, and take up social texts. Such readings shape acts of authorship: the close link between reading and writing, both the world and the world” (p. 80). This value on sophisticated uses of performative speech is a hallmark of shoptalk and reflects the intense, well-rehearsed cognitive demands it places on its participants.

Theoretical Sources

Majors synthesizes a set of interrelated frameworks through which to pose her notion of shoptalk.

From sociolinguistics, she sees speech as a contributing factor in one’s cultural identity kit (Gee, 1992), with identities being both performed and constructed through engagement in situated discourse genres. From critical race theory (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1998), she adopts a perspective oriented to challenging inequitable power structures of the sort often contested by women in the salons she studied, particularly the institutional structures so deeply embedded in a culture’s consciousness that they appear natural and inevitable.

Together, these approaches allow her to view shoptalk as more than just conversation occurring in a benign setting while hair is styled. Rather, through their discussions, the women deconstruct their experiences, often with racism, and position themselves as having agency in breaking down the institutions and those who populate them as a means of asserting their own societal authority. This *transformative-equity-based framework*, as Majors calls it, provides shoptalk with a substance and urgency that transcend idle conversation and move the discourse to a level of political power. As such, it represents a hybrid form of discourse that the salon setting provides a medium for eliciting.

Shoptalk in one Urban Classroom Setting

Majors hopes to understand “how the classroom can be transformed into a robust space where students may apply such [shoptalk] practices to their academic and lived lives” by drawing on home and community discourse conventions (p. 102). Doing so involves accepting risk and disruption as valuable aspects of social learning, and maximizing the experiences and knowledge from home and community. This emphasis stands in contrast with the tendency to wash out personal, lived understandings of the world in school and to treat students’ first-order means of worldly engagement as deficits to be overcome. Shoptalk thus works in opposition to the values of the Common Core State Standards and their emphasis on reading [“within the four corners of the text”](#) and treating texts as autonomous and magisterial. Rather, it values thinking that is collaborative, historical, contextual,

emergent, exploratory, performative, ironic, witty, and participatory.

In the classroom, the student role tends to be more that of the spectator than the participant, and the Black child who participates out of turn is constructed as boisterous and disobedient. For shoptalk to be practiced within the formal confines of the school classroom, border crossing becomes necessary. In particular, a shoptalk pedagogy would encourage cultural border crossing such that multiple students could participate in the co-construction of ideas rather than having one speaker formally recognized to occupy the floor at one time, with classmates quiet and attentive (or, at least, quiet). Majors emphasizes border crossing of many sorts in this study, with the introduction of a form of speech typically considered to lack propriety in school to be introduced as a primary vehicle of speech for urban students who understand its dimensions. Majors discusses teachers' (and others') tendency to refer to their vision of people as "color blind," as if they see all people as the same, regardless of skin color. Although this stance may be admirable from the standpoint of equity, it has the pernicious effect of being blind to the ways in which the kinship group of the African American community affiliates around a set of cultural practices.

On this matter I am informed by another recent study, [Hobbs's \(2015\) research on racially ambiguous people of partial African heritage](#) who engage in the practice of "passing" as White, often leaving behind their families in the process, with the consequence of great feelings of loss and regret. In considering the complex issue of race, Hobbs attends to the problem of race as a social construction, with racially ambiguous people often required to declare their belonging to one group or another, but not both. Even those like [poet and novelist Jean Toomer](#), whose White appearance belied the presence of Black blood, and who resisted racial categorization, was ultimately forced to be classified as Black by a society driven by the belief that such a determination matters above all.

Hobbs, in considering the problem of racial classification, concludes that people affiliate around feelings of kinship, often racial in basis.

Eurocentric values require that any non-European racial heritage will spoil a White identity and lead one to be assigned to a racial group of lower status, prestige, and opportunity. The notion of an African American discourse, thus, may be seen as that which is developed among those whose primary kinship group is the African American community, often as a consequence of having some percentage of African blood in one's family lineage. Although this affiliation may be treated as a choice, it is a choice that is shaped by powerful forces from those in the environment for whom it matters what color a person should be treated as.

Shoptalk, therefore, embodies the cultural practices and perspective of those whose primary kinship group is composed of those who identify as African American, and who embrace its conventions as valid and of great practical value. One benefit of drawing on the qualities of shoptalk in urban classrooms is that it may reduce the number of adaptations that African American youth must make in order to cross the cultural border from neighborhood to school and its conception of academic success. Learning a whole new academic vocabulary and speech genre may require a great adaptive effort that may inhibit rather than promote engagement with the curriculum. As Lee (1993, 2000, 2007) has found in her series of studies of African American speech genres and their appropriateness in school, grounding instruction in students' home languages may give them quicker access to academic material than requiring them to learn an academic social language as prerequisite to engagement. As a former student and ongoing collaborator with Lee, Majors endorses this principle as a fundamental reason for promoting shoptalk in the urban classroom.

Shifting from the salon to the school, Majors sees this framework serving as a means of liberating students from the roles available to them in their everyday lives. That is, rather than seeing themselves as pathologized urban youth destined for the prison cell and welfare line, they have the opportunity to assert for themselves a more powerful role in constructing positive social futures for themselves. Here, according to Majors, "Shoptalk may provide an alternative space that structures opportunities for students to sort

through the real-life dilemmas that they are expected to take up, as well as work through academic tasks, like identifying and solving problems in literature” (p. 26).

At the risk of hijacking Majors’ work for my own purposes, I suggest that these hybrid classroom spaces allow for the availability of a *positive social updraft* (Cook & Smagorinsky, 2014; Smagorinsky, in press), a process through which people—particularly those who are disenfranchised or disadvantaged—may be swept “upward” through participation in legitimate cultural practice. I have used this phrase primarily in relation to mental health and how productive lives may become possible when those with diagnoses and classifications suggesting their deficient status in the world are viewed in light of their assets rather than their points of difference. Being treated as able, intelligent, resourceful people with strengths and social value, and being viewed as knowledgeable people with legitimate perspectives and ideas, gives youth from backgrounds in which incarceration is common a way to challenge this fate and, perhaps more importantly, [challenge the system in which their skin color paints them as hostile and criminal in the eyes of social institutions and their representatives, from communities and their police forces to classrooms and their teachers.](#)

To Majors, the notion of narrative argumentation is a key aspect of shoptalk that is of particularly value in the salon, but tends to be prohibited in school and its essayist tradition. In particular, she emphasizes the role of cultural counter-narratives that “invoke narrative knowledge and storytelling to challenge the social construction of identity, race, and power, eschewing the experiences of White, European Americans as the normative standard, and grounding its conceptual framework, instead, in the distinctive contextual experiences of people of color” (p. 40). Shifted from the salon, this value “invites the design of instructional conversations that enables individuals to enact their roles as problem-solvers from a critical standpoint and draws on community-based norms for talk and problem solving as the medium for the

generation of coping strategies that are hybrid in nature” (p. 41).

The shoptalk pedagogy that Majors outlines is based on a scaffolding process that involves apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation. In the tradition of Gates (1989) and Lee (1993), Majors finds that the qualities of shoptalk—its ironic, interpretive, indirect, imaginative, performative manner of conveying meaning—provide it with a logical bridge to the literacy classroom. She identifies Lee and Lee’s doctoral studies mentor, Hillocks (e.g., 1995), as particularly influential in her adaptation of shoptalk to classroom literacy instruction.

[Lee’s \(2007\) Cultural Modeling framework](#) includes a set of design principles that are indebted to [Hillocks’s pedagogy for teaching writing and literature](#). A teacher in this tradition first conducts a *task analysis* that identifies the key skills that a task involves and suggests activities through which they might be taught. Although the ultimate goal is for students to work toward learning processes that experienced readers and writers have developed, the pedagogy begins with students’ immediate, familiar knowledge as they engage with accessible materials known in this approach as *data sets*, and known in teacher education as the material representing students’ prior knowledge. The process is thus inductive; rather than having the teacher explain the procedures, the students generate them through an activity designed to involve them in a specific form of inquiry and problem-solving. For example, I’ve developed an activity to demonstrate how such instruction works for teachers with whom I’ve encouraged this approach: Organize students in groups of 3-4 and have them take out their cellphones, which seemingly everyone owns these days regardless of circumstances. Most people love their phones and love their gadgets and affordances. The task is simple: Who has the coolest cellphone?

In most cases, each group member would argue on behalf of his, her, or zir own beloved phone. In doing so, they are engaging in processes central to a variety of tasks: argumentation (making claims, providing and warranting evidence, addressing

counter-arguments), extended definition (elaborating criteria for phone coolness and illustrating them with examples and contrasting examples), comparing and contrasting (comparing and contrasting features and affordances of different phones), narration (illustrating quality with stories of the phone's amazing role in a personal experience). From this introductory or gateway activity, tasks of the given sort may be undertaken with more advanced, complex, and distant materials, such as the canonical texts of the school literature curriculum.

Lee's (2007) application of this approach to racialized learning involves drawing on African American discourse conventions during the process of argumentation, and using data sets that are immediately familiar to African American youth. These social texts ought to provoke students to engage with problems from their environments that are similar to the issues aired out in African American hair salons, often concerning discrimination, misunderstanding, and conflict due to racial bias. Through their analysis as cultural data sets, they should promote inquiry that deconstructs social institutions and their representatives and draws on their emotional and intellectual response to generate counterarguments that involve the qualities of shoptalk in construction and presentation. For the most part, the cultural data set would appear to include texts that the students can talk back to, make inferences about the assumptions of, and argue against: texts that presume that the students' own status in life is blighted and deficient. Through the inductive process of challenging these texts, students engage in what Lee (2007) calls *metacognitive instructional conversations* that provide them with tools for undertaking social critique in relation to other texts.

North Lawndale, the site of Majors's teaching, is a Chicago neighborhood in which 70% of men aged 18-45 had criminal records as of 2001 (Street, 2002), a problem that may follow as much from assumptions made by police about who constitutes the criminal class as it does about the conduct of men in the area. The key text that Majors used when teaching in North Lawndale was former U.S. Secretary of Education (among many key policy

positions) [William Bennett's infamous public statement](#) that "If you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose—you could abort every Black baby in this country and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossibly ridiculous and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down." Of course, you could also reduce the crime rate by aborting every White baby, but as phrased by Bennett, the problem of crime is one largely confined to the African American population. Bennett also elides attention to his [conservative party's rejection of abortion](#) as a solution to social problems, but I digress. Within this broad context of prejudicial stereotype and oppression, minoritized Americans work discursively to construct more reality-grounded, generous, and appreciative self-constructions that build on assets and resources and regard aberrations as anomalous and unrepresentative of the whole.

William Bennett's serious statement about reducing crime by aborting Black babies—horribly reminiscent of [Swift's satirical *A Modest Proposal*](#) in which he suggested that wealthy people eat the babies of the poor to address poverty and eliminate food shortages—provided Majors with such a text. Majors reports on how her use of this text in her North Lawndale classroom worked, offering this summary of how her students engaged with the text:

For this student, this complex construction of self, with the interrelated identities of capable student, member of society, and engager of Bennett, is to the student's benefit as she moves across similar texts. The tools she draws upon include ways of speaking, performing, and reasons, and constitute transformations within the classroom—not just of talk, but also of self. In other words, as she participates in the activity within the classroom through the use of such tools and resources, she transforms, taking on roles, identities, and participant statuses within the participation framework of the classroom and Bennett's argument. (p. 145)

As teacher research, her report of her instruction cannot possibly attend to the experiences of each student in the classroom, and so we must accept her description of this student as perhaps the ideal outcome of her instruction. Her point, however, is to offer an exemplar to demonstrate the potential of this pedagogy and give other teachers an opportunity to see how, in one distinctive setting, it worked under her own implementation. That limitation does not provide the sort of “taken to scale” research that infatuates policymakers, but that’s not her goal. Rather, it’s to illustrate one dedicated teacher’s application of what she learned through the extended study of informal discussions taking place in the hair salon, a site of gathering for African American women, and demonstrate how it might work as a pedagogical innovation. That illustration is of considerable value to the teaching profession, if not the policy world in which ethnographies are considered too narrow, local, and idiosyncratic a data set on which to base national standards and practices.

Ethnography, however, is never meant to be taken to scale. Its great achievement is to show, in contrast, why *nothing* can be taken to scale in a large, culturally diverse national population such as that in the U.S. Indeed, the claims offered by Majors are a form of counterargument against national policies that elide difference. Furthermore, by claiming to be color-blind and culture-blind, national policies become blind to human diversity, assuming that one curriculum and assessment vehicle is fair and equally accessible to all, that the same test item is identical to each test-taker regardless of how their background prepares them for the content and phrasing of the questions (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Smagorinsky, 2011). That assumption takes quite a beating throughout this book as Majors explains the socially situated nature of shoptalk and in turn argues against standardization based on White middle class values. Although I would not expect policymakers to be impressed by a volume that details in such clarity and lays out so abundantly why their approach is wrongminded and pernicious in consequence to the population that serves as the focus of Majors’s research, our educational system would be more sensitive to cultural variation if they

were to pay attention to the lessons available in this book.

Challenges in Implementing Shoptalk in Classrooms

Perhaps the greatest challenge of extrapolating from Majors’ work to classrooms concerns the difficulty that many White teachers may have with drawing respectfully and fruitfully on AAE and shoptalk to ground students’ schoolwork. Among the key hair salon events she reports is a story told by a woman who, as a teacher, attended a meeting at which a White teacher confessed that, because her family heritage included slave ownership, she was uncomfortable teaching about slavery in class. Majors also reports a White hair stylist in a Black salon who struggled to maintain a client base because of her difficulties establishing intersubjectivity with many patrons of the salon. Intersubjectivity refers to the degree to which different people share a construction of the setting and understanding of the basis for how the setting is interpreted by others. The notion of intersubjectivity is particularly important in understanding cross-cultural communication of the sort analyzed by Majors, in which different interpretations of the same material and ideas are potentially at work when urban students enter school classrooms.

Given that White women make up by far the largest demographic in the teaching profession, with White teachers comprising 83.5 percent of the teaching force (National Center of Education Statistics, 2007-2008) and women comprising 84% of the profession (Feistritz, 2011), questions of intersubjectivity and one’s comfort levels of teaching students from other cultures become of paramount importance (see Delpit, 1995). As Majors demonstrates extensively in this book, African American students must cross multiple borders to fit in with the discourse expectations of school, while teachers are required to make few. Majors’ proposal that shoptalk may serve as a key bridge between urban students and school discourse conventions is primarily illustrated by her own return to her community of origin to undertake a pedagogy in which shoptalk plays a key

instructional and academic role. However, her own high levels of intersubjectivity with these students undoubtedly gives her a greater chance to succeed than would the undoubtedly awkward and likely inappropriate efforts of a White teacher consumed by guilt over her ancestors' ownership of her students' ancestors. Majors describes "the teacher who reads her students and attempts to teach them based on her interpretations, which are shaped by local and distal factors" (p. 67)—in Freire's (1985) phrase, the teacher who reads the world in the word. And yet it's a daily occurrence for White people to "read" Black people wrong, as the examples that Majors provide from salon shoptalk exchanges demonstrate.

Majors outlines a set of skills that one must have in order to adapt shoptalk to classroom settings. These include

- An understanding of the rules of Black modes [of] discourse and the roles of the participants within it
- An understanding of the positioning of the speaker as it shapes authorial intent
- Ability to identify implied audience
- The underlying meaning or intent of a text
- An understanding of coherence within inference generation
- Ability to generate response to claim within a narrative
- Ability to take on roles (and to step in and out of them within the discourse) through the appropriation of contextualized terms in order to construct an expert knowledge and enact an epistemic stance. (p. 86)

Adapting shoptalk to school instruction might provide quite a challenge for the sort of person who most typically enters the teaching profession. Traditionally, schools have expected students to undertake the majority of adaptations; the relatively recent field of [culturally appropriate instruction](#) represents a fraction of what has been proposed, and has tended to be the province of minoritized teachers, researchers, and theorists who are challenging the *status quo*. Yet among Black teachers, there is also a tradition of the strict teacher who takes a fairly militaristic approach to participation and discipline, as personified by Joe

Louis Clark, the former principal of Eastside High School in Paterson, NJ, an urban school where he instituted draconian disciplinary policies, a career brought to public attention in the film *Lean on Me* (Avildsen, 1989) in which he was played by an [imperious Morgan Freeman](#). More recently, Keegan Michael Key has played this authoritarian role to comic effect in his portrayal of [urban teacher Mr. Garvey](#), laying down the law while substituting in a class of suburban White students.

Harriet Ball, the Texas teacher who became the model for the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter school network and its no-nonsense approach to education, perhaps represents a medium between the authoritarian and the culturally relevant teacher. [Ball drew on AAE conventions for her methods](#), particularly the use of rhythm and meter in devising chants through which to teach her students material, yet did so in a closed-ended manner in which reciting the chants verbatim demonstrated learning. In contrast, shoptalk's adaptation to the classroom would produce an open-ended, collaborative, spontaneous means of narrative argumentation through which multiple identities are negotiated, as opposed to all students following the teacher's lead faithfully. KIPP's use of Ball as a model appears to draw on her authoritarian stance more than her remarkable charisma, intelligence, inventiveness, and understanding of African American speech genres, as evidenced by the [anomalously high KIPP expulsion rates](#) that suggest that conformity and obedience, more than culturally relevant teaching, have served as their model for schooling.

It thus appears that shoptalk's application to the classroom should be undertaken with care. I can imagine many White teachers finding it difficult to pull off, and many authoritarian Black teachers finding it counterproductive to their value on law and order. Yet in the hands of teachers acculturated to the practices of shoptalk, it could indeed serve as a compelling pedagogy that engages African American youth both with schoolwork and the broader project of asserting a legitimate role in society without sacrificing the potential available through the expression of African American speech genres. And for other teachers, it is a call to action to begin seeking ways of learning to understand the

nature of shoptalk so as to better serve their students and their profession.

Conclusion

In this last section I have raised some concerns about the broad applicability of shoptalk as a classroom pedagogy. Those caveats should not be taken as anything more than the sort of limitation that characterizes all research. Even without the pedagogical extension, this book achieves much in documenting the role of shoptalk in the lives of those for whom it serves as a principal means of narrative argumentation. Majors documents the ways in which shoptalk serves its speakers admirably, just as other situated forms of argumentation—conducted among biologists, theologians, sports commentators, and virtually any other community of practice with its own vocabulary and terms of engagement—allow their participants to achieve their ends.

As part of a relatively new [line of inquiry undertaken by minoritized scholars](#) who study their communities' interactional patterns, this study makes a strong contribution to work that demonstrates the legitimacy and opportunities for the adaptation of speech genres from their sites of origin across borders to new settings in which they may have new application. The value of such work is immense, and the value of this study within that field is great. I highly recommend this volume to classroom teachers who seek to draw on the speech conventions of shoptalk and other aspects of AAE to provide more culturally relevant learning opportunities, and to anyone interested in rhetoric, argumentation, narration, cultural practice, cultural psychology, education, and anywhere else where it matters how ideas are generated and extended within the parameters of genres of discourse.

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About the Reviewer

Peter Smagorinsky grew up in segregated Virginia in the 1950s and 1960s, only attending school with Black students when integration became law when he was in 7th grade, when one Black male was enrolled in his junior high school. To save money for a family of 5 kids on a government scientist's salary, his mother cut his hair until he was out of college; and in college, he got his hair cut about once a year. At this point in life, he gets his hair cut at Supercuts and simply asks the stylist to use the #2 blade and shear him like a sheep.



1974



2014

He is thus not Black, not a Woman, and not a frequenter of hair salons. And yet, he was delighted to have the opportunity to read and review this terrific book.