Cultural Modeling as a Frame for Narrative Analysis

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Narrative is a universal genre of both oral language and written texts (Turner, 1996). Some have argued that through narrative, humans impose meanings on experience (Bruner, 1990). Such meanings are individual and also capture cultural models of human agency—as well as cultural schemas for relationships, culturally appropriate goals, and subsequent actions to fulfill those goals (D’Andrade, 1987). Most national and/or ethnic cultures carry forward from generation to generation archetypal themes and plots that are interrogated and reworked with each new generation (Berman & Slobin, 1994). With the above assumptions, we can view patterns of narratives as opportunities to view what a group of people deem important in the conduct of human affairs. The storytellers—the poets, novelists, and playwrights—often wrestle with taboos, with the deeply unresolved questions of the human experience. They act as seers and priests who help us to connect vicariously with experiences that are too difficult for us to take on directly; through imagination, we can enter subjunctive worlds and try on identities that we would not ordinarily be bold enough to assume. Narrative, then, is a powerful tool that, although universal, unfolds and acts in culturally specific ways. Amy Tan’s (1989) wrestling with the winding way of chi from the past through the hybrid spaces of the
present carries subtle messages that someone who is not Chinese or Chinese American may have difficulty understanding. More important, the authorial audience of *The Joy Luck Club* is composed not merely of those who are Chinese or Chinese American in terms of ethnic heritage but also of those who understand basic tenets of Taoist and Confucianist thought, as well as the tensions between old culture and new. That is to say, the authorial audience (Rabinowitz, 1987) is defined by their beliefs and practices (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003).

In a country like the United States, understanding the culturally specific nature of any activity, including narrative, is complicated by the diverse nature of ethnic culture (Lee, Spencer & Harpalani, 2003). Depending on many factors, people are both American and of some other ethnic origin. Pan-ethnic groups often represent political categories more than categories of actual ethnic practice. Ethnic groups are often a hybrid of old world practices and new world adaptations. Because of the legacy of what African American historians have termed the “African American Holocaust of Enslavement,” people of African descent face special challenges—their having for centuries been identified by others on the basis of race alone clouds the ability of some to recognize in themselves those qualities of belief and practices that are ethnic and of African descent (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003). Among the most visible indices of ethnic beliefs and practices among people of African descent living in the United States (and in other parts of the Diaspora) is how the vast majority of them use language. There is a significant body of research documenting both the systematic features of what is called African American English (AAE) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Baugh, 1983; Morgan, 1993; Smitherman, 1977) and the African origins of its syntax, phonology, and lexicon (Mufwene, 1993; Rickford & Rickford, 1976). It is indeed ironic how what some call this Africanized English has been both vilified and lionized simultaneously. It is vilified as nonstandard English, as an indicator of a lack of intelligence or competence, and as a barrier to upward mobility (see Labov, 1972; Smitherman, 2000a). It has been lionized in great literature (e.g., by Toni Morrison, AliceWalker, Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, August Wilson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston, to name a few) (Jones, 1991), commodified in advertisements, reified in music across the generations, and dramatized around the world through hip-hop culture (Smitherman, 1973). Aspects of AAE have been the language of liberation for African Americans through the civil rights movement, for Polish workers, for Chinese dissidents, and for the war against apartheid in South Africa. By these examples, I mean not merely the theme of language but the very structure of genres and the syntax aimed to inspire ordinary people to take bold actions.
In this chapter, we consider the semiotic potential of African American narrative traditions for literacy development among African American children. Children are in the process of learning the narrative traditions of their families and communities. They have incomplete and evolving knowledge of such narrative traditions. Different communities apprentice children into what Heath (1983) calls “ways with words,” or ways of using language, specifically through capturing experience in narrative. In Heath’s (1983) classic study, African American children in a southern working-class community learned that in order to get adults to listen to their recounts of experience, the children needed to articulate the meaning of public experiences rather than to simply recount events that both the children and the adults have witnessed. This narrative socialization focused on examination of the internal states of actors as stepping-stones to goal-directed behaviors (i.e., the plot). In addition, children were socialized both through their opportunities to tell stories and through listening to the stories told by adults and older peers that the form of the message (i.e., the creativity in ways of using language) was as important as the content of the message (Smitherman, 1977). This emphasis on creative ways of using language has been codified by Smitherman (2000b) in what she calls the “African American Rhetorical Tradition.” This tradition is often captured in narrative forms, although it can be found in expository forms as well (Ball, 1992, 1995). According to Smitherman (2000a), the African American Rhetorical Tradition includes:

1. rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language
2. reference to color-race-ethnicity (that is, when topic does not call for it)
3. use of proverbs, aphorisms, Biblical verses
4. sermonic tone reminiscent of traditional Black Church rhetoric, especially in vocabulary, imagery, metaphor
5. direct address-conversational tone
6. cultural references
7. ethnolinguistic idioms
8. verbal inventiveness, unique nomenclature
9. cultural values-community consciousness
10. field dependency; involvement with and immersion in events and situations; personalizing phenomena; lack of distance from topics and subjects. (pp. 86–87)
Culturally Responsive Narrative Analysis and Instructional Design

We have argued that narrative is a way of imposing meaning on experience and that the forms of narrative—including the cultural models, schemas, and scripts that they capture—are culturally specific. We have also noted that African American English and by extension the children for whom this is a first language have been vilified and underserved in public education. We have reasoned that because of narrative’s role in life-course development and its centrality to literate practices, we can learn much by examining and ultimately influencing the narrative practices of African American children who are speakers of AAE. This orientation is situated in what we call the “Cultural Modeling Framework” (Lee, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2000, 2001).

The aim of Cultural Modeling is to facilitate students’ learning generative concepts in academic subject matters by helping them to make connections between the target knowledge and forms of knowledge they have constructed from their home and community experiences. The design of instruction according to Cultural Modeling principles involves a careful analysis both of the target academic task and of the everyday practices of students. The goal is to make connections that may be based on similar strategies, analogies, or naïve concepts. Previously, Cultural Modeling conceptualized similarities in the strategies used by speakers of African American Vernacular English to produce and interpret figurative language—such as symbolism, irony, and satire—and the strategies expert readers use to interpret such tropes in literature. We have made similar connections between the strategies used to interpret irony, satire, symbolism, and the use of unreliable narrators in rap lyrics and other products of popular culture (many emanating from African American culture) and the strategies used to interpret canonical works of literature. In both instances, the Cultural Modeling Framework required unique analyses of literary as well as everyday practices. In our investigations of everyday narrative practices as a scaffold for writing narratives, we needed both theory and analytical methods to evaluate and characterize narratives, and the theory and analytical methods had to be sensitive to the cultural specificity of uses of African American English in both oral and written narratives.

Several bodies of research proved useful in these efforts. One body of research situated how African American children’s narratives were positioned in school contexts. Among the classic research in this area are the sharing time studies by Michaels (1981) and Cazden (Cazden, Michaels, & Tabors, 1985). They found that the oral narratives produced by African
American primary school children were not being understood by teachers. “Sharing time” is an activity where children bring objects from home and tell the class stories about these objects. The White middle-class children in the study told stories that had linear plot configurations. The teachers understood this structure, as it mapped onto the school essay tradition to which they were trying to apprentice students. The teachers were then able to give the children immediate feedback as to ways to make their descriptions more explicit and their plots more detailed. Michaels calls the structure of these stories “topic centered.” The African American children, on the other hand, told what Michaels calls “topic associative” stories. The scenes of the plot changed, but the teachers could not perceive any order to the stories. As a result, they were not able to provide the African American children with feedback for improving their stories. In a follow-up study, Cazden (1988) found that topic centered and episodic narratives were evaluated differently by Black and White adults. Whites thought that episodic narratives were ill formed and indicated low achievement; whereas, Blacks found value in both forms. This research raises important questions about how the oral narratives of African American children should be analyzed, both in theory and in practice. Gee (1989) challenged the findings of the sharing time research. He reanalyzed the narrative of one of the children, Leona, and posits a different interpretation of the structure and quality of her story and, by extension, of the topic associative narrative style. Gee’s narrative analysis drew on literary theory to divide the story into stanzas and to examine the rhetorical function of each stanza in relation to every other stanza. Gee argues that the topic associative narrative developed by the children is an emergent form of a more literary narrative structure, one that children would not be expected to address until much later in their school careers. Fundamentally, Gee claims that the emergent structure of the topic associative narrative is more complex than the linear topic centered narrative structure that the primary school valued. Gee’s analysis makes evident the difference that theory can play in the evaluation of narrative structures, particularly in the school context.

Since the sharing time studies of Michaels and Cazden, other researchers have documented the range of narrative structures employed by African American children (Hyon & Sulzby, 1994). These include, especially as children get older, a more widespread use of what are termed “classic structures,” which are more akin to Michaels’s topic centered narratives than the sharing time studies implied. In addition, Champion (1998, 2003) has found that the contexts under which narratives are elicited can make a difference in the structure and length of the oral stories told by African American students. In particular, Champion emphasizes that the use of an
interlocutor who responds to the storyteller ("Un huh," "Is that right?") appears to engage African American children. Among the range of narrative features that Champion found in several studies of African American children’s storytelling styles is a performative aspect. Performative aspects of African American children’s narratives include a high use of dramatic intonation, gesture, and rhythmic prosody. These features are consistent with those found in other research on speech genres within the African American English speech community, including signifying and loud talking (Mitchell-Kernan, 1981; Smitherman, 1977). Signifying is a form of ritual insult that includes use of figurative language and hyperbole (Lee, 1993). Smitherman observes that African American rhetoric spans a spectrum from the secular to the sacred. These performative features can be found in secular genres, such as signifying, as well as in sacred genres, such as the structure of sermons delivered in African American churches (Moss, 1994).

The Cultural Modeling in Narrative Project

To test our hypothesis that the range of features of narratives in the African American Rhetorical Tradition were part of the narrative repertoire of African American children who are speakers of African American English, and that scaffolding these features in instruction could lead to the development of complex written narratives, we designed the Cultural Modeling in Narrative Project (Lee, Mendenhall, Rivers, & Tynes, 1999). A key lever in this work was to be able to translate the research on African American English and African American children’s narratives both into analytic methods for evaluating children’s narratives and into the design of prompts and other supports that would help to develop the quality of narratives we imagined possible.

The design principles of the Cultural Modeling Framework required that we develop supports that would lead children to reflect on their prior knowledge and its relevance to writing narratives. In Cultural Modeling, this process usually occurs through the careful selection of what we call “cultural data sets” (Lee, 1999). Children should already be very familiar with the cultural data sets and the analysis of the cultural data sets should involve the same strategies and/or concepts that are demanded to carry out the target academic task. In the selection of cultural data sets for this work in written narratives, we were influenced by two bodies of research. The first is that of Hillocks (1986, 1995). Hillocks argues that writers need declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge of forms. The term “forms” here refers to the structure of genres, for our purposes, narrative.
This includes the knowledge of (1) internal states of characters and how their goal-directed behaviors are an outgrowth of those internal states and (2) how to describe dialogue, setting, and actions. "Declarative" knowledge involves knowing that narratives have people, a sequence of actions, a setting, dialogue, and so on. "Procedural" knowledge involves knowing how to translate these elements of narratives into written language. This process of translation into written language is no easy feat for the best of writers. "Conditional" knowledge involves knowing when to use particular sources of knowledge and how to evaluate their effectiveness in relation to the writer’s purpose. In Observing and Writing, Hillocks (1975) describes a series of activities that engage students in writing descriptions (of objects, such as shells, of scenes from pictures to elicit dialogue, etc.). Hillocks calls these “gateway activities.”

The lessons of Hillocks’s research in composition are reinforced by Sadoski and Paivio’s (2001) dual coding theory of reading and writing. Sadoski and Paivio make the claim that reading and writing involve similar cognitive processes. This linking of reading and writing is important because of our interest in ultimately influencing both the reading and writing competencies of students. As part of the Cultural Modeling in Narrative Project, students both read and produced written narratives. In addition, Sadoski and Paivio (2001) make a case for the importance of imagery to both the encoding and retrieval of knowledge in long-term memory. They state that imagery can serve as a structural vehicle that inspires, organizes, and carries a written work regardless of its genre. . . . Certain images can stand for an abstract idea and as a retrieval cue for associated images and language. . . . The imagery system provides a way to store concrete memories of the world and to transform and manipulate those memories free from the sequential constraints that characterize language. (pp. 157–158)

On the basis of these two bodies of research, we selected as cultural data sets pictures that captured cultural scripts from African American life. In particular, we used pictures from the famed African American artist Annie Lee. Annie Lee has created an array of works of art depicting scenes from the Black Church, of the historical act of jumping the broom, of African American grandmothers working in the kitchen. We postulated that these scenes captured cultural scripts with which many African American children would be deeply familiar; that these images would elicit concrete memories of scenes, smells, and dialogues, as well as an understanding of the internal states of characters; and that these images would therefore act as generative cultural data sets to serve as prompts for writing.
In the instructional design, children heard African American storytellers, watched video clips of African Americans in film engaged in culturally familiar ways of telling stories (one example was a clip from August Wilson’s *The Piano*), and finally were presented with Annie Lee pictures. In each case, students were supported in the process of translating the visual image into written products. These supports included instruction in how to punctuate dialogue, how to create paragraphs, and how to find new words to express descriptions and feelings. Students first developed oral narratives and then translated their oral narratives into written narratives.

In evaluating the children’s written and oral narratives, we drew on Smitherman’s (2000c) work on the African American Rhetorical Tradition that we described in an earlier section of this chapter. Smitherman examined 867 writing samples from elementary aged African American children based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessments for 1984 and 1988 to 1989. Smitherman found that the African American children in her sample produced better quality narratives than expository writing. Further, she found a positive correlation between the presence of features of the African American Rhetorical Tradition and the quality of the writing as judged by NAEP evaluators. Interestingly, she also found a decline in use of AAVE syntax features over time. Using Smitherman’s methods for narrative analysis and the work of Peterson and McCabe (1983) on narrative structures, we evaluated the corpus of written and oral narratives produced by the children in our sample.

Research Site

This research was conducted in two elementary sites in a large urban school district. Each school served an all African American student population. The research reported in this chapter focuses on a combined third and fourth grade class of students at McDonald Elementary School. McDonald School has 97% low income students and a mobility rate of 34%. Many of the combined third and fourth graders in this class have failed first or second grade more than once. Most of the 25 children in the class were 10 and 11 years old, and yet they had not fully mastered basic decoding. Their spelling was definitely more like that of emergent writers in the first and second grade. They were not designated as special education, but they were a unique class of students in the school in that in the primary grades they had experienced repeated academic failure. By contrast, McDonald School was known as one of the best schools in the system, having beaten the odds in terms of their students’ achievement in reading comprehension. However, the gains of the school as a whole had not yet profited this particular group of students.
We report on this class because they represent a special illustration of cultural scaffolding for children who are in greatest need of academic support. We see the work with this class as a classic case of Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD). The idea of the ZPD is to understand the difference between what these children can do by themselves and what they can do with support.

Data Analysis and Findings

Instruction involving the cultural data sets as prompts for writing was carried out by both the teacher and the members of our research team. The students’ engagement with the Annie Lee cultural data sets is captured in field notes:

We then asked the students to talk about what was happening on the cards (in the Annie Lee picture called Six Uptown). I wrote their responses on the chalkboard, using capital letters and underlined words for emphasis. Black English was also used with the Standard English version written directly above it so the students could distinguish the two. Some of the students’ responses included the following:

Precious shouted, “OH LORD!”
Precious threw her head back and said, “talk to the hand.”
Denise cried, “I’m gonna [going to] win this time.”
Claudia shook her head and said, “You betta [better] stop cheating!!”

(R. Mendenhall, field notes, December 9, 1999)

Not only are the children engaged in the activity of looking at the pictures, but they are also able to use their funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) and personal experiences to make meaningful inferences from the pictures that become the base for their generation of details in the narratives. This gives them access to a much larger toolkit for writing than is generally available with more traditional writing prompts.

In the current study, we collapsed several of Smitherman’s features, resulting in the following coding categories for what we call “African American Discourse Features”:

- Use of dramatic language
- Use of or description of body language and gesture
- Sermonic tone
- Cultural references
- Use of direct speech
- Use of ethnolinguistic idioms
- Field dependency
Students were encouraged to work together. Of the 25 students, 16 submitted 13 stories based on the Annie Lee pictures, 4 were written in pairs and 9 were written individually. Based on what Boykin (1994) calls an “Afro-cultural ethos,” he has demonstrated that for African American students, it is working collaboratively in groups, without extrinsic rewards, that leads to the largest gains in learning. Boykin (1994) posits that for African American children, group work appears to activate “intrinsic motivational processes” (p. 134). In a similar vein, we found that the children gravitated to work in cooperative groups, even without prompting. Two researchers independently coded their stories for presence of the African American Discourse Features. Initially, interrater reliability was 85%. On areas of disagreement, raters discussed their differences and came to consensus.

All the students employed African American Discourse Features (AADF) in their narratives. Researchers coded a minimum of 2 instances of AADF in these stories, with an average of 5.7 instances per story. Stories ranged in length from 7 sentences to 15. We believe that the scenes in these pictures were so familiar to the students that they were able to use their available cultural resources in constructing narratives based on the pictures.

Presence of African American Discourse Features

*Use of Dramatic Language and Field Dependent Style*

The use of dramatic language and the presence of a field dependent style was prominent in students’ narratives. There were 6 out of 13 stories that contained dramatic or provocative language, while 8 of the 13 showed evidence of field dependency. “Field dependency” is defined as the tendency to put one’s self inside a situation and to view elements relationally. Dyson (1997) discusses the degree of permeability of the “official world of school” as the key factor in determining children’s success in merging home and school worlds. A curriculum that creates such a space increases the likelihood that writers will develop confidence with narrative structure. We see the same phenomenon occurring with the Annie Lee narratives. Due to the familiarity of the scene, students were invited to bring the world of their families, friends, and neighborhoods into their narratives in ways that went beyond an explicit written prompt asking them to write about a familial topic. In the examples of field dependency below, each student has inserted himself or herself as the character.¹

“Gabriel is just getting off work.”

“Kenneth is playing a banjo.”
“Nathaniel is playing checkers. . . .”

“Andre is drinking pop and bouncing the ball.”

Randall is dancing his butt all over. Takanna is standing on the corner. . . .”

To illustrate the level of inferencing by students, we will include the pictures on which the children’s descriptions are based. The following picture of an old man sitting in his chair prompted descriptive detail. There were 6 different stories that gave a sensual description of the day and season implied in this picture:

![Image of an old man sitting in a chair]

Figure 1.3.1 Annie Lee’s Daily Snooze

“It was a hot, sunny day. . . .” (G.N.)

“It is a long sunny day. . . .” (R.B., I.L.)

“It was one long, hot, sunny day.” (A.C.)

“It was a hot sunny day. . . .” (L.D., J.P.)

“It all started on a hot summer day. . . .” (A.N.)

“This is a hot sunny day in the summer. . . .” (D.C.)
While each description includes a reference to the fact that the sun was shining, there are interesting syntactic differences in how the students appropriated this detail. A.C.'s reference to "one long, hot sunny day," has an emphatic air very replete with an expected AAVE prosody that emphasizes "long" by virtue of its modifier "one." In addition, the attributes of long and hot are not explicit in the picture but must be inferred by the children. It is also interesting to note that all of these phrases are the first sentence of each story and are nearly identical. While we do not see the typical "Once upon a time . . ." as an introduction to any of their stories, the students' alternative beginning certainly serves the same rhetorical purpose, as a marker not only of the setting but of the start of the story. It is possible that the familiarity of the scenes in the Annie Lee pictures, coupled with the structure of the narrative writing lessons, has forged a link between culturally relevant material and the structure of narrative writing. This pattern certainly demands further exploration.

Some students extended their use of dramatic language beyond the introductory phrase. The next story provides a dramatic description of the day and employs parallel structure as an emphatic device to dramatically capture the actions of the character.

"This is a hot, sunny day in the summer. Harry was sitting on the chair, just sitting on the chair changing channels and eating popcorn, crackers, and chips. . . ." (D.C.)

In the picture used as the prompt for this narrative, there is no television, and there are no popcorn, crackers, and chips—there is simply an old Black man falling asleep in a chair with a newspaper falling from his hands. The addition of details from the child's imagination, presumably based on lived experience, is another example of the semiotic potential of these visual prompts. Our suspicion is that these vivid scenes from scripts of African American life have a very different potential for stimulating the imagination of these children—and therefore their ability to generate the kinds of descriptive detail that characterize good written narratives—than, for example, postcards of Impressionist paintings of French men and women walking in the park, the women wearing long, bustled gowns.

The Use of a Sermonic Tone and Cultural Referents

Of the 16 students, 4 incorporated the sermonic tones of the African-American church and cultural referents. These were additional features
identified by Smitherman (2000c) as elements of the African American Rhetorical Tradition, and they were used by the older elementary students whose NAEP writing samples she examined. African American writers such as James Baldwin in *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and Richard Wright in *Black Boy* also effectively invoke the sermonic tone of the Black Church. It is interesting to note that when the students, as emergent writers, attempted to create sermonic tones, they often did so by creating dialogue. Remember, they were responding to pictures that have no words. This picture by Annie Lee is the prompt that invited students to capture in written narrative the talk, the sounds, the feelings of a Pentacostal Black Church experience.

![Figure 1.3.2 Annie Lee’s Eb-body Say Amen](image)

“Mr. Johnson threw up his Bible and said, ‘Thank you Jesus! For giving me a wonderful ceremony’ and Ms. Sara said, ‘Amen to that.’” (G.N.)

“I want the Lord to help me love. . . . then she said, ‘I want the Holy Ghost.’
Then she said, ‘I want you to help me Lord.’” (A.S.)

“She is saying ‘Oh Lord help me.’” (R.B.)

Again, our argument is a cultural one. These students gain access to schema and cultural scripts they know well as a scaffold for the production of dialogue, descriptive detail, and actions that capture the internal states of character types they know well. These prompts support the development of the kinds of procedural skills for narrative production that Hillocks (1995) describes.

Another way in which students activated cultural scripts was through the use of cultural referents in their narratives. One of the pictures captured an activity called “jumping the broom.” During the era of the enslavement, lynchings, and burnings of Blacks in this country, the African American Holocaust of Enslavement, Blacks were not even legally allowed to marry. So to mark the ceremony of entering into the sacred institution of marriage, couples would jump over a broom. That ceremony has been maintained within contemporary African American culture. It is not uncommon for couples today to follow up a church marriage ceremony by jumping over a broom. In G.N.’s narrative based on this picture, she recognizes and names the ceremony. She creates dialogue and gives names to the man and woman being married, drawing on her cultural scripts to construct action in the plot.

“The wedding looked so pretty. There was dancing [and] Mr. Johnson said to his wife, ‘I love you.’ ‘I love you, too,’ Ms. Sara Lee said.

... They both were happy. They jumped over the broom.” (G.N.)

The following picture depicts a woman working in the fields. She is wearing a head-dress and long skirt. L.D. and J.P., working together, extrapolated

Figure 1.3.3 Annie Lee’s *Jumping the Broom*
from the one woman to the “Black people” and chose for the woman’s work to drive the plot. Their use of the phrase “the white man” has common usage in the African American community and communicates a point of view about power relationships between Blacks and Whites.

Figure 1.3.4    Annie Lee’s 100% Cotton

“The Black people went to work for the white man . . . picking cotton . . .” (L.D., J.P.)

The last example of a cultural referent involves a variety of foods commonly called “soul food.” The following scene depicts a diner. The cultural scripts evoked by the picture lead the students to identify specific foods that they would expect to be served there. As with the other pictures, there are not sufficient details in the picture for the students to name particular foods. Rather, they use imagination to name and describe the food they would expect to find served at the corner restaurant. In addition to A.N.’s referents, other students also talk about ham hocks, smothered chicken, short ribs, candy sweets, and catfish—all items on a typical soul food menu.
“Claudia was eating some fish with hot sauce.” (A.N.)

A.N. goes on to create characters with names, describe what they were wearing, state the time of day (5:00 p.m.), and give the address of the diner.

**Direct Address and a Conversational Tone**

The use of direct forms of address and conversational tone are other features of the African American Rhetorical Tradition. As many students incorporate dialogue into their stories, the characters speak through direct forms of address about love, feeling tired, the weather, and prayers to God.

“Mr. Johnson said to his wife, ‘I love you.’ ‘I love you, too,’ Ms. Sara Lee said.” (G.N.)

“She is saying, ‘Oh Lord help me.’” (R.B.)

“Lard said, ‘It’s very hot.’

Boy Willy said, ‘Yes, it is very hot.’ . . . Zahkiyah said, ‘I’m going with my mom.’

Takanna said, ‘I am going with my mom’” (N.A.)

“. . . Harry was sitting on the chair changing channels, eating popcorn, crackers, and chips, saying, ‘I am so tired. I have a full stomach. . . .’” (D.C.)

“I am tired.” (D.L., J.P.)
Integrating African American Discourse Norms

We have provided illustrations of isolated uses of African American discourse features across the corpus of the children’s narratives in response to the Annie Lee pictures. The following story by G.N. was a response to the jumping the broom picture described earlier. It is a well-formed narrative that integrates many of the African American discourse features we have described in rhetorically appropriate ways.

It was a hot, sunny day. Ms. Sara Lee and Mr. John Johnson were getting married. It was back in 1895, March 31. Ms. Sara looked so pretty [and] Mr. John looked handsome. The wedding looked so pretty. There was dancing. Mr. Johnson said to his wife, “I love you.” “I love you, too,” Ms. Sara Lee said. They both were happy. They jumped over the broom. Mr. Johnson threw up his Bible and said, “Thank you Jesus! For giving me a wonderful ceremony.” Ms. Sara said, “Amen to that.” They had a beautiful background and the most beautiful wedding. She had on a beautiful wedding dress. It was so pretty. Mr. Johnson had a suit on that shined up the place. Ms. Sara Lee’s dress was sort of a marble color, and her dress shined up the place also. They looked so happy together. (G.N.)

In addition to establishing the setting (hot, sunny day; March, 1895; a wedding), naming the characters (Ms. Sara Lee and Mr. John Johnson), describing their dress (sort of a marble color), and creating the coda (they looked so happy together), G.N. also creates dialogue for the characters in a sermonic tone (Mr. Johnson threw up his Bible and said, “Thank you Jesus! For giving me a wonderful ceremony.” Ms. Sara said, “Amen to that.”). This exchange reflects a clear cultural script of call and response. Also, her use of hyperbolic descriptions of Mr. Johnson’s suit and Ms. Sara Lee’s dress, that they “shined up the place,” is an ethno-linguistic idiom with great drama. Finally, her reference to Ms. Sara Lee as Ms. Sara is another ethno-linguistic idiom. It has been traditional in the African American community to refer to an older woman in the community as Ms. and her given name. G.N.’s story meets the criteria for a well-formed story that is also replete with uses of African American discourse features.

Discussion

In this chapter, we have tried to make a case for the ways that the use of cultural data sets as prompts for narrative writing can extend the potential of the quality of written narratives produced by a group of severely underachieving African American third and fourth graders. These students, who had repeated
first, second, or third grade more than once, had been isolated from their peers in a special class. While we have documented their use of features of good narrative writing, their skill in spelling, the use of punctuation, and the formation of sentences and paragraphs remained severely impaired. In many respects, these surface features of poor spelling and punctuation hid from the teacher’s and the school’s view the strengths these children had available to bring to their writing. To the extent that severely remedial students, such as these at McDonald School, experience writing instruction that focuses primarily on surface features, without balancing attention on the skills and strategies necessary to create well-formed narratives—such as descriptions of setting and the creation of characters (especially of their internal states), of dialogue, and of action—they could well remain severely remedial writers of the sort described by Shaughnessy (1977). Flowers and Hayes (1981) argue that developing writers need a mental model of the product and operations of composition. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) argue that procedural cues could facilitate the composing and editing skills of novice writers. Hillocks (1995) argues that novice writers need supports for developing the procedural skills that will allow them to competently produce the elements of the genres of narratives, arguments, and extended definition. In the Cultural Modeling in Narrative Project, we attempted to enter this on-going conversation by posing an argument for the ways that cultural prompts and facilitation cues can help children make links to existing schemata and cultural scripts. The Annie Lee pictures, the video clips from narrative dialogues in movies such as August Wilson’s *The Piano*, and oral storytelling by African American storytellers all served as artifacts or tools that extended the resources available to the children to use in composing their narratives. In many respects, these particular artifacts function like the tertiary or imaginative artifacts described by Cole (1996), which by their very nature invite imagination and an envisioning of other possible worlds. By invoking such cultural scripts, students are able to use imagination to construct inferences that form the base for the explicit use of language and detail. In our study of the field testing of this curricular approach in another school, with students without the extensive remedial needs of the students reported in this chapter, we found positive correlations between the quality of students’ writing and their use of African American discourse features, as did Smitherman with NAEP writing samples. With the Cultural Modeling Framework, we attempted to design learning environments that explicitly connect deep disciplinary knowledge and problem solving with the competencies students develop as they participate in routine cultural practices outside of school. With the Cultural Modeling in Narrative design, we tried to link what the cognitive literature on the act of composing says about the process with those competencies that young
speakers of African American Vernacular English develop as they hear and tell oral stories outside of school. In addition, with the Cultural Modeling Framework we attempted to design participation structures (Phillips, 1983) that offer students opportunities to use multiple mediational means for attacking problems. Boykin’s (1994) work on the intrinsic value that working in groups affords the African American students he documented across multiple controlled studies led us to design explicit opportunities for collaborative work in composing narratives. For this particular group of severely remedial students, the opportunities to compose narratives in pairs proved engaging for them. We found that the use of African American discourse features increased as students worked in pairs.

In addition to the design principles described, we also needed analytic methods to capture features of the narratives. Our methods of narrative analysis were informed by sociolinguistic literature on African American English and prior work on African American children’s narratives. Based on Sadoski and Paivio’s (2001) theory of dual coding in reading and writing, we selected prototypical scenes of African American life as captured in the Annie Lee pictures. Our methods of narrative analysis and prompts were symbiotically related. The prompts were intended to elicit the features that our methods of narrative analysis were intended to capture. Smitherman’s (2000c) research documenting correlations between the presence of African American discourse features and the quality of African American student writing on NAEP samples led us to believe that facilitating these cultural features in student writing would result in better narratives. We found that images also spark the imagination of the best of our writers. As Murray (1978) explains,

When Gabriel Marquez was asked what the starting point of his novels was, he answered, “A completely visual image . . . the starting point of Leaf Storm is an old man taking his grandson to a funeral. . . . Joyce Carol Oates adds, “I visualize the characters completely; I have heard their dialogue, I know how they speak, what they want, who they are, nearly everything about them.” (quoted in Sadoski & Paivio, 2001, p. 152)

Alice Walker says that Celie in The Color Purple speaks in the voice of her great-grandmother. The children from the McDonald School observed the scenes of their lives, heard the voices, smelled the odors, knew the characters. Despite the limitations of their decoding skills, they told stories of African American life, using the creative rhetorical strategies of the African American tradition, and in the process created narratives that shed light on the meaning of their membership in the African American community.
Note

1. For purposes of clarity, we have transcribed the students’ stories with correct spelling and punctuation. The words, however, are the children’s, and their actual initials follow their work.

References


