

# Other People's English

Code-Meshing, Code-Switching,  
and African American Literacy

Vershawn Ashanti Young  
Rusty Barrett  
Y'Shanda Young-Rivera  
Kim Brian Lovejoy

foreword by  
April Baker-Bell

afterword by  
Victor Villanueva

Parlor Press  
Anderson, South Carolina  
[www.parlorpress.com](http://www.parlorpress.com)  
Copyright © 2018 New City Community Press

**Appendix**

# 5th- to 8th-Grade Language Arts— Writing, Speaking, and Listening— Mini-Unit: Code-Meshing

## CODE-MESHING

Combining two or more dialects, language systems, and/or communication modes to effectively write and speak within the multiple domains of society.

## CODE-MESHING GOALS

1. To identify the stereotypes associated with speaking various dialects of English, which are often confused with slang, and/or referred to as informal English, home language, or nonstandard English.
2. To explain why negative stereotypes about and stigma against various dialects exist and the harm they have caused to students in language arts classrooms.
3. To liberate both teachers and students from imbibing and perpetuating dialect prejudices.
4. To promote an instructional approach that allows writers and speakers to draw from and combine any and all available dialects, languages, communication skills, strategies, and resources within their personal repertoire to effectively and affectively write and speak in all domains.

Because the goals of code-meshing are multifaceted, code-meshing lends itself to the possibility of being covered under multiple academic disciplines. However, for the purpose of *Other People's English*, this mini-unit is language arts based, with a specific focus on code-meshing goals 4, as written above.

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS

### Writing

- W.1. Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
- W.3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
- W.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1 and 3 above.)

- W.7. Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.
- W.10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

## Speaking and Listening

- SL.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 5 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- SL.4. Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.
- SL.6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, using formal English when appropriate to task and situation.

## LESSONS

### Lesson 1: Pre-survey/Introduction to Code-Meshing

#### *Materials:*

Pre-survey forms

Music clip—Song—“Dynamite”

Student writing journals

1. Have students complete pre-surveys. Then play the music clip of the song “Dynamite.” Pass out the lyrics and discuss the process by which the writer might have been inspired to write the words to this song. Walk with the students through the chorus and verses to extract the meaning.
2. Take a poll of the students to see who likes the song and why.
3. Direct their attention to how the words of the song look written on the paper.
4. Discuss what would probably happen if this song would have been written and turned in for an English class.
5. Summarize that this very popular and well-understood song is an example of something we want to study this week, called code-meshing.
6. Define code-meshing. Explain to the students that code-meshing doesn't mean you do away with all formal English but it means to find a flow between different dialects that most powerfully expresses what you want to say.
7. Discuss with students the difference between formal/informal and standard/nonstandard English. Together identify examples of each.
8. Point out that although formal English is pushed as the so-called standard, no one consistently operates flawlessly in it. Also, point out that informal English is not bad English; it is simply a different dialect.

## Writing Assignment 1

Lead into the writing assignment by referencing that the author of the song “Dynamite” was obviously at a point and place where he felt good, free, and excited and he wanted to express those feelings: *Without being worried about your language usage, whether formal or informal, write to express a time when you felt good, free, and excited. You can do this through a song, rap, poem, or narrative.*

### Homework

Look and listen for examples of code-meshing all around you, when you leave school. Bring three written examples with you to class tomorrow.

## Lesson 2: Who Said What?

### Materials:

2 sets of pictures:

- One set will consist of pictures (3–5) of people of various ethnic groups with quotes that they spoke. Try to get quotes that don't necessarily match what you would think the person said, if you were just looking at them.
- The other set will be pictures (5–8) that evoke various emotions. They will be used to complete writing assignment 2

### Student writing journals

1. Pair students and give them an opportunity to share their writing, from yesterday, with each other.
2. Lead into today's lesson by asking students the following questions:
  - What are some of the factors that affect the way in which we speak? (ethnicity, where you were born and raised, where you are, and whom you're talking to)
  - Are there times and situations when certain speech and writing should be avoided? (when with friends versus with parents or at school or on a job interview; proper and not proper English might even come up in the discussion)
  - How do you determine when to speak and how?
3. Define dialect:
  - When you hear the way a person speaks, does that let you know something about him or her? (Possible answers: They are smart, dumb, successful, and so on.)
  - So who comes to mind when you think of a successful person? Unsuccessful? How does s/he speak or write?
4. Who Said What?: Hang up 3–5 pictures of well-known people from various ethnicities. In their pairs, give students a set of the 3–5 quotes and have them correctly match the quote with the picture of the person who said it. (Deliberately try to pick some that don't look like they belong together.) Before revealing the answers, engage students in a dialogue about why they made their choices.

5. Discuss what it means to stereotype and judge versus acknowledging true factors that identify certain racial and ethnic groups. Recognizing that there are exceptions to lots of our stereotypes

## Writing Assignment 2

Put students in groups of five. Place one picture in the center of the table for each group. Have students look at the person in the picture. What emotions is the face showing? Jot down any words that come to mind. Next, imagine this person in the context of a conversation. Where are they? Who are they talking to? What story is the picture telling you? Write that story. Narrative texts tell stories. (Give examples of topics and title ideas for anyone who might be stuck.)

## Lesson 3: I Am Persuaded

*Materials:*

Movie clip—*The Great Debaters*

Rules of debating

*Student writing journals*

1. Review yesterday's content. Have a few people share their stories. (Remind them that we are listening for content and *not* judging for writing and/or speech, grammar errors, and so on.)
2. Lead into lesson with discussion questions:
  - Have you ever had an argument?
  - Why do people argue? (to prove their point or get others to see their side)
  - How do most arguments come to an end? (somebody changes their view or they agree that they don't agree and they go on)
  - What would make someone change his or her views (the information that is presented by someone)
3. Give examples of what's considered a successful argument.

### Make sure to tell your students:

When we began this unit, we said our aim was to look at both speech and writing. Our last couple of days will be spent doing something that involves both. Sometimes when people have different opinions about something, one will try to persuade the other to believe or accept what s/he says. This can be done in writing through persuasive text as well as through something we call debating.

4. In order to successfully debate, certain things must take place. Outline the rules of debating. Get students' background knowledge about debating.

5. Show clip from *Great Debaters*—civil disobedience
6. Point out how in the movie clip, to the White person, civil disobedience was an outrageous breach of the law. However, when looked at through the eyes of African Americans trying to gain civil rights, it was a much more peaceful alternative than the option of violence.

### *Writing Assignment 3: Debate Preparation*

This last assignment will be carried out over the final 3 days. Students will be researching, writing about, and debating one of three current event issues: the longer school day, jail time for violent juvenile offenders, or the rights of illegal immigrants to stay in the United States. Take a poll of students to see where they stand.

#### **Note to teachers:**

Students will write stating their position and at least three reasons why they support their position. Continuously encourage effective language use, both formal and informal.

### **Lesson 4: I Am Persuaded (continued)**

#### *Materials:*

Student writing journals

Resources for research—computers with Internet access, news articles

Divide students into groups of five.

### *Writing Assignment 4: Debate Preparation*

Each group will continue to research their debate topic and work to combine to their thoughts and ideas, as well as fine-tune their arguments for the debate. Teacher will assist groups as needed.

#### *Homework*

Prepare for the debate. Winning team will be identified according to rubric scale.

### **Lesson 5: Debate/Post-surveys**

#### *Materials:*

Post-survey

### Student writing journals

1. Debates: Using their persuasive texts and following the rules of debate, each team will debate for or against the stated topic.
2. Administer post-surveys.

### *Final free write assignment*

Write about the things you learned from participating in this unit.

#### **Notes**

These lessons were written only to serve as an example of how code-meshing can look within the classroom. Long-term, it is our hope that teachers, curriculum design teams, and policymakers will make it a priority to collaborate and take the baton of code-meshing further.

The following rubrics will be used for journal responses and debates.

### **JOURNAL RESPONSE AND COMPREHENSION RUBRIC**

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. The student writes a journal response.
2. The student writes between one and two paragraphs to express thoughts.
3. The student responds to questions by self-questioning, retelling, and or predicting.
4. The student's experiences and opinions are clear.
5. The student works with a peer to share journal responses and to develop a combined response when requested.

#### **Scale**

4—Excellent: The student completes the task with no major errors. The student demonstrates a full understanding of the concepts.

3—Adequate: The student completes the task with only a few major errors and some minor errors. The student demonstrates a strong understanding of the concepts.

2—Minimal: The student completes the task with some major errors and many minor errors. The student has difficulty understanding the major concepts.

1—Attempted: The student fails to complete the task. The student does not understand the concepts.

**Rubric—Debate**

Requirement	Number of Points	Points Earned
Research Guide <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facts listed</li> <li>• 3–5 sources documented</li> </ul>	30	_____
Index Cards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name and position on front</li> <li>• Reflection on back</li> </ul>	30	_____
Debate Do's <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher observation</li> </ul>	30	_____
All work is neat, legible, and turned in on time.	10	_____
Grade		

**PRE-SURVEY**

For the following questions tell whether you:

*A—agree, D—disagree, N—neither agree nor disagree*

1. I can tell if a person is smart by the way he or she speaks.
2. I am smart.
3. I know the difference between formal and informal English.
4. I like expressing myself through writing.
5. I feel frustrated when I write and it needs to be corrected.
6. I should be free to write and speak however I am used to.
7. I must use formal English when I write in school.
8. Using informal English means that I am not talking “proper.”
9. Talking “proper” means to use formal English.
10. Everyone must learn to use proper English in order to be successful.
11. If you use improper English you will not be successful.
12. I love school and learning.
13. My teacher makes me feel smart.
14. Sometimes I don't feel smart when I speak and write.
15. I am confident in my speaking and writing skills.
16. I feel smart when I talk proper English.
17. I can get in trouble, at school, for using informal English.
18. When I want to show that I am smart, I use formal/proper English.
19. I can only communicate with someone who speaks my language.



20. I can't *write* formal and informal English at the same time. I have to choose to use one or the other.
21. I can't *speak* formal and informal English at the same time. I have to choose to use one or the other.
22. I know what *code-meshing* is.
23. I know what *code-switching* is.
24. I feel like I am not being real when I speak or write in proper English. It's just not me.
25. Sometimes, because of prejudices, I am not proud of my cultural heritage.

### Culture Discussion Questions

1. When you think of a smart person, who comes to your mind? Name three smart people that you know. How do you know they are smart?
2. What makes a person smart? How can you tell if a person is smart? Do you think you're smart?
3. Why or why not?
4. What is Standard/formal English? What is slang/informal English?
5. Name some people who use formal English.
6. Name some people who use informal English.
7. Do you think people use/should use either one all the time?
8. What do you like about writing? Dislike?
9. What do you like about language? Dislike?

Look back over your statements. Choose one statement to write about.

### POST-SURVEY

For the following questions tell whether you:

*A—agree, D—disagree, N—neither agree nor disagree*

1. I can tell if a person is smart by the way he or she speaks.
2. I am smart.
3. I know the difference between formal and informal English.
4. I like expressing myself through writing.
5. I feel frustrated when I write and it needs to be corrected.
6. I should be free to write and speak however I am used to.
7. I must use formal English when I write in school.
8. Using informal English means that I am not talking "proper."
9. Talking "proper" means to use formal English.
10. Everyone must learn to use proper English in order to be successful.
11. If you use improper English you will not be successful.
12. I love school and learning.
13. My teacher makes me feel smart.

14. Sometimes I don't feel smart when I speak and write.
15. I am confident in my speaking and writing skills.
16. I feel smart when I talk proper English.
17. I can get in trouble, at school, for using informal English.
18. When I want to show that I am smart, I use formal/proper English.
19. I can only communicate with someone who speaks my language.
20. I can't *write* formal and informal English at the same time. I have to choose to use one or the other.
21. I can't *speak* formal and informal English at the same time. I have to choose to use one or the other.
22. I know what *code-meshing* is.
23. I know what *code-switching* is.
24. I feel like I am not being real when I speak or write in proper English. It's just not me.
25. Sometimes, because of prejudices, I am not proud of my cultural heritage.

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Code-meshing is:
2. What have you learned about dialects?
3. Since doing this unit, have your thoughts about the way that you speak and write changed?
4. Do you think code-meshing should be allowed in schools? Why/why not?

## The Code-Meshing Project

(Dr. Vershawn A. Young and Y'Shanda Rivera)

### I. SURVEY

1. To what degree do the following factors influence your language instruction/practices in the classroom?

(3—Strongly influences, 2—Moderately influences, 1—Doesn't influence)

State standards   2   Curriculum/textbooks   2    
 Education/training   3   Ability level of the students   3    
 Personal language habits of the students   3   Your personal language experiences   3  

2. How familiar are you with the following terms?

(3—Highly familiar, 2—Somewhat familiar, 1—Not at all familiar)

Code-switching   2   Code-meshing   1   Code-mixing   1    
 Multilingual   3   Plurilingual English   3  

3. To what degree do the following influence your language instruction/practices?

(3—Strongly influences, 2—Somewhat influences, 1—Doesn't influence)

Code-switching   2   Code-meshing   1   Code-mixing   1    
 Multilingual   1   Plurilingual English   1  

4. For the following two statements, rate if you:

5—Strongly agree, 4—Agree, 3—Neutral, 2—Disagree, 1—Strongly disagree

A. Because language and dialects are ever evolving, most linguists agree there is no homogeneous "American Standard" language.   1  

#### Comments

Not sure if "most" linguists believe this, but I am aware of this issue. I realize the English language is ever evolving. I believe that students need to be able to speak, read, and write what I call academic or formal English in the appropriate setting. For example, subject/verb agreement, capitalization, pronoun agreement, etc. (mostly grammatical issues).

B. Rejecting a student's dialect is, in a sense, rejecting a student's culture.   4

*Comments*

Teachers need to distinguish between formal and informal language, just as they do for formal and informal behavior. Formal English can be taught without disrespecting students' dialects. Teachers need to place the instruction in the appropriate context for kids to understand, appreciate, and be receptive to learning.

5. I am familiar with the NCTE Student's Right to Their Own Language Resolution of 1974.  
Yes/No   N  

*Please place a check next to the following terms for which you would like to know more information*

Code-switching   X                        Code-meshing   X                        Code-mixing   X    
Multilingual English   X                        Plurilingual English   1    
Student's Right to Their Own Language Resolution   1  

## II. BACKGROUND/DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

What grade level(s) do you teach?   8  

Number of years' experience teaching   8  

Gender   F  

Race   C  

Approximate racial mix of students in the *school* where you teach:

African American   48%   White        Hispanic   52%   Asians       

Others                            

Approximate racial mix of students in the *neighborhood* where you teach:

African American   50%   White   50%   Hispanic        Asians       

Others                            

Approximately what percentage of students in the *school* qualifies for free and/or reduced lunch?   99  

Approximately what percentage of students in the *neighborhood* qualifies for free and/or reduced lunch?   Same

Do you have any experience teaching in a setting that is racially and economically different from where you are currently teaching? If so, briefly describe:

---

---

---

*Thank you for participating in this survey!*

(Optional) Please provide email address for more information \_\_\_\_\_

## The Code-Meshing Project

(Dr. Vershawn A. Young and Y'Shanda Rivera)

### I. SURVEY

1. To what degree do the following factors influence your language instruction/practices in the classroom?

(3—Strongly influences, 2—Moderately influences, 1—Doesn't influence)

State standards   3   Curriculum/textbooks   3    
 Education/training   3   Ability level of the students   3    
 Personal language habits of the students   3   Your personal language experiences   3  

2. How familiar are you with the following terms?

(3—Highly familiar, 2—Somewhat familiar, 1—Not at all familiar)

Code-switching   3   Code-meshing   3   Code-mixing   2    
 Multilingual   3   Plurilingual English   1  

3. To what degree do the following influence your language instruction/practices?

(3—Strongly influences, 2—Somewhat influences, 1—Doesn't influence)

Code-switching   3   Code-meshing   3   Code-mixing   1    
 Multilingual   1   Plurilingual English   1  

4. For the following two statements, rate if you:

5—Strongly agree, 4—Agree, 3—Neutral, 2—Disagree, 1—Strongly disagree

A. Because language and dialects are ever evolving, most linguists agree there is no homogeneous "American Standard" language.   4  

Comments:

---



---



---

B. Rejecting a student's dialect is, in a sense, rejecting a student's culture.   5  

Comments

I recall talking about this in my graduate school courses and how it is detrimental to reject how a person expresses themselves. It is like you're not accepting the total person.

---

5. I am familiar with the NCTE Student's Right to Their Own Language Resolution of 1974.

Yes/No   N  

*Please place a check next to the following terms for which you would like to know more information:*

Code-switching      Code-meshing   X   Code-mixing   X  

Multilingual English      Plurilingual English   X  

Student's Right to Their Own Language Resolution   X  

## II. BACKGROUND/DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

What grade level(s) do you teach?   4 & 5   Bilingual     

Number of years' experience teaching   6  

Gender   F  

Race   Mexican American  

Approximate racial mix of students in the *school* where you teach:

African American   40%   White      Hispanic   60%   Asians     

Others                    

Approximate racial mix of students in the *neighborhood* where you teach:

African American   50%   White      Hispanic   50%   Asians     

Others                    

Approximately what percentage of students in the *school* qualifies for free and/or reduced lunch?   98%  

Approximately what percentage of students in the *neighborhood* qualifies for free and/or reduced lunch?   95%

Do you have any experience teaching in a setting that is racially and economically different from where you are currently teaching? If so, briefly describe:

Yes

---

---

---

*Thank you for participating in this survey!*

(Optional) Please provide email address for more information\_\_\_\_\_



## The Code-Meshing Project

(Dr. Vershawn A. Young and Y'Shanda Rivera)

### I. SURVEY

1. To what degree do the following factors influence your language instruction/practices in the classroom?

(3—Strongly influences, 2—Moderately influences, 1—Doesn't influence)

State standards   2   Curriculum/textbooks   2    
 Education/training   2   Ability level of the students   3    
 Personal language habits of the students   3   Your personal language experiences   2  

2. How familiar are you with the following terms?

(3—Highly familiar, 2—Somewhat familiar, 1—Not at all familiar)

Code-switching   2   Code-meshing   2   Code-mixing   2    
 Multilingual   1   Plurilingual English   1  

3. To what degree do the following influence your language instruction/practices?

(3—Strongly influences, 2—Somewhat influences, 1—Doesn't influence)

Code-switching   1   Code-meshing   1   Code-mixing   1    
 Multilingual   2   Plurilingual English   1  

4. For the following two statements, rate if you:

5—Strongly agree, 4—Agree, 3—Neutral, 2—Disagree, 1—Strongly disagree

A. Because language and dialects are ever evolving, most linguists agree there is no homogeneous "American Standard" language.   4  

*Comments:*

---



---



---

B. Rejecting a student's dialect is, in a sense, rejecting a student's culture   5

Comments:

---



---



---

5. I am familiar with the NCTE Student's Right to Their Own Language Resolution of 1974.

Yes/No   N  

Please place a check next to the following terms for which you would like to know more information:

Code-switching   X                        Code-meshing                          Code-mixing      
 Multilingual English                          Plurilingual English   X    
 Student's Right to Their Own Language Resolution   X  

## II. BACKGROUND/DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

What grade level(s) do you teach?   7 & 8  

Number of years' experience teaching   8  

Gender   F  

Race   Indian American  

Approximate racial mix of students in the *school* where you teach:

African American   4%   White   45%   Hispanic   50%   Asians   1%  

Others                                            

Approximate racial mix of students in the *neighborhood* where you teach:

African American   4%   White   55%   Hispanic   40%   Asians   1%  

Others                                            

Approximately what percentage of students in the *school* qualifies for free and/or reduced lunch?  
  40%  

Approximately what percentage of students in the *neighborhood* qualifies for free and/or reduced lunch?   60%

Do you have any experience teaching in a setting that is racially and economically different from where you are currently teaching? If so, briefly describe:

No \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you for participating in this survey!*

(Optional) Please provide email address for more information \_\_\_\_\_