



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## *The Grammar of the Harlem Renaissance*

When assigned to our college's Learning Skills Laboratory, it became my responsibility to tutor developmental writing students, explain computerized writing programs to students unfamiliar with them, and upgrade some developmental writing software that had become outdated. The last concern soon began to take more and more of my time. Much of the lab's material was little more than an attempt to fill computer screens with materials developed decades earlier and better suited for long-forgotten workbooks than the instruments of high technology. The software also ignored the fact that urban classrooms, as mirrors of an ethnically diverse society, required materials relating directly to African-American students, Hispanic students, Native American students—in short, large portions of the populations of today's community colleges.

Since I knew little at that time about the tools of multimedia authoring, it took a number of months and a great deal of silent, seemingly brooding concentration to produce a program that I called "The Grammar of the Harlem Renaissance." The program, in CD ROM format, showed learners excerpts from Nora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and varied the onscreen texts to create grammar drills, eliciting student interactivity while focusing on the problem of sentence fragments. It also utilized paintings by Jacob Lawrence and other period artists to illustrate Hurston's prose, and it featured recordings from *Folkways Classic Jazz Anthology* to accompany the grammar drills and give instruction in the music of the Harlem Renaissance.

Students seemed to love the program, but several faculty members became concerned that scanning great paintings, using Hurston's prose as material for grammar instruction, and recording Red Nichols and His Five Red Hot Pennies, may violate fair use laws, even though done for purely in-house instructional purposes. I called the legal department at Harcourt Brace College Publishing to identify the possible dangers of my efforts. The more I explained the project to them, the more interested they became. They sent a Senior Acquisitions Editor to view the work. Her visit led to a long-term working agreement, in which the publishing

company contracted for four modules, two dealing with works of the Harlem Renaissance and two with Hispanic authors. The first two of these (the Zora Neale Hurston module described previously and a program using Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* to teach pronoun/antecedent agreement) will appear in January as a part of what Harcourt Brace intends to call The Culture and Grammar Series.

During the testing of the software, a process carried out on several campuses, I was occasionally questioned about the nature of the thing we were creating. Was it literature or was it grammar? Was it developmental work or cultural work? I must admit that I question the wisdom of such separations—as though Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston derived the richness of their prose from long hours with grammatical exercises! If our students are to learn grammar, they must feel it in the richness of both the oral and the written traditions that surround us. The rules governing communication are not dry bones to be examined apart from the beauty of the communicative process itself; art, music, drama, poetry, and storytelling are far more effective textbooks than are the compilations of exercise A, exercise B, etc.

We do not know what the national response to The Culture and Grammar Series will be. We anxiously await the results and are eager to create further modules. The grammar mistakes made by students around the country are only seemingly infinite, but the artworks that can be used to remedy such problems go on forever.

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## Community Involvement Through Composition?

Students are often so overwhelmed by their roles as students, employees, and family members that they often overlook their role as citizens. Participation in community service is a means to becoming a productive citizen, so an assignment in my freshman composition classes requires research into community service. I encourage volunteer participation in an organization, preferably in the student's area of study, prior to turning in the assignment.

I invite a representative from our local volunteer resource center to visit the class and explain the needs in our community. With her help we compile a list of possible options that are not only in our community but in surrounding communities as well, and that do not require special training—homeless shelters, homes for the aged, nature centers, adult learning centers, etc.

The students select an organization that interests them and write a documented essay about it. They are required to gather information about its history, purpose, successes, volunteers, and anything else that they find of interest.

Because books have not been written about many of the organizations, the students cannot rely on the library for all their information. They have to incorporate other means of research, such as the Internet, newspapers, brochures, personal interviews, personal observations, etc.

I encourage the students (by way of extra credit) to volunteer at least five hours to this service. I do not require the volunteer work because many of the students' other roles do not leave much time for this commitment.

Both students and local organizations have provided positive feedback about the assignment. Some students have continued to volunteer even after the class was over, others have said that they see the need and want to help when they do not have so many demands on their time, and the organizations have said, "Send us more!"

While the students are developing research and composition skills, they are also learning more about the needs of their community and proving to be productive citizens.

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**Suanne D. Roueche**, Editor

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