Charles Keil
John Trimbur
Peter Elbow

MAKING CHOICES ABOUT VOICES

INTRODUCTION
John Trimbur

I take great pleasure in introducing the following document/memo/manifesto in part because Charles Keil was one of the faculty in the visionary American Studies program at the State University of New York at Buffalo who opened my eyes, as a graduate student in the late 1960s, to culture as the lived experience of ordinary people. But aside from acknowledging this longstanding debt, I want to explain who Charlie Keil is to colleagues who study and teach writing. As it happens, he is an award-winning ethnomusicologist (see bibliography) and the founding spirit of projects to reunite the arts in community-building performance, the school-based Musicians United for Superior Education (see www.musekids.org) and the path band movement (see www.128path.org). His notion of “participatory discrepancies” is the best explanation I’ve ever heard of how music swings and gets people in the groove by being slightly “out of time” and “out of tune.” And, to my mind, it also offers a way to think about how people can do things together at all—how, that is, we participate in common life by speaking, writing, singing, dancing, or otherwise signifying in constant give-and-take split-second negotiation.

This concern for the way participation actually works (what Keil calls “controlled imperfection”) is central to “Making Choices About Voices.” The work of composition begins in this instance, as it invariably does, with an interpretive reading of student writing. You can feel a familiar, palpable sense of empathy and frustration when Keil describes the half-articulated voices and sliding registers in two book reports. As you will see, this critical reading puts the student’s writing in crisis, not to correct it but to grasp its latent powers, yearnings, and affiliations—and reveals Charlie Keil to be a rhetorician who draws on his association with Kenneth Burke not only to understand musical performance but, in this case, to imagine how students might enact, dramatistically, multiple codes, identities, and social allegiances.
MAKING CHOICES ABOUT VOICES
Charles Keil

This memo could have a lot of different titles. I want to persuade one student in particular to take three steps: 1) write poetry regularly; 2) develop a prose style for and from her home culture, a prose style of solidarity; 3) develop a crisp, professional, all-purpose "King's English." But many students and human beings generally could use this "triple competence," a "both/and" approach to communication in writing, starting with: 1) "who I am" as a poet; 2) "who we are" socially; and 3) "who I could become" in the corporation-controlled, university-assisted, bureaucratically manipulated world as it has been recently and is today. With these three foundation competencies established a person can move confidently to fluency in more than one language, knowing some dialects of each language, having a variety of solidarity prose styles and poet's skills as strategies for situations. This is a good goal for many individuals and probably good for the world historical process too.

I'm looking at two "book reports" that have some poetry in them, but it is hidden, smothered; ideas behind the sentences are poetic, playful, hinting at participatory consciousness but these impulses are screened from view. The book reports have some African-American dialect in them but it is scattered, NOT free-wheeling, flowing, in your face, NOT a celebration of another way of being and speaking both in the world and on the page. Rather, the writing comes across as long, unpunctuated sentences filled with annoying 'grammar mistakes' suspended somewhere between the 'black world' and the 'white world.' It is NOT poetry. It is NOT sassy black prose. It is NOT crisp, clear, easy to read 'King's English.' And this prof wants one of these three voices, or another compelling voice, to appear on the page representing a person I know to be very intelligent, very quick, very eager to make a difference in the world.

I call the third voice "King's English" because it has authority and centuries of text usage, dictionaries, thesaurus compilations, libraries full of books, behind it. To get a good job, rise up the ladder, be effective in today's world you need to have command of this language. Go to the composition course, go to the writing lab, read Ernest Hemingway, learn to write short sentences in topic-sentenced paragraphs, practice noun verb agreement, avoid the passive voice constructions, learn the rules of punctuation and any other rules that an efficient user of the King's English can tell you have been broken over and over again in your present
ineffective prose style. To often, what I’m reading is the writer’s imagined approximation of what the King’s English might sound like! Get it right and make it real.

Poetry. Demystify it. Practice it a few times a day. Make metaphors in the moment. Find the poems inside the prose you have written. Bring it out. Try different line schemes. Speak into a tape recorder and transcribe it. Speak or scream or whisper it just the way you want it. Try to get the sound and feeling of it on to the page. The King’s English is the King’s. There are rules. Learn them and follow them. Poetry is yours. No rules. Whatever you say and put on the page is what it is. Get a copy of The Rattlebag and rattle with the rest of us.

The intermediate prose, #2 above, is more of a puzzle, a negotiation, saying it the way the people closest to you would like to hear it. Maybe they would like to hear you able to jump back and forth from poetry to the King’s English without missing a beat. Maybe they would like to hear or see you show mastery of the King’s English in order to deliberately mess with it, subvert it, play with it. Maybe they would like to hear it straight from the heart, but elegant. It is not easy to give advice because for each person the negotiation is going to be different every day. Many people don’t see the need for this language. No one can tell you how to do it. But I think it is very important to solve this puzzle, to find a new middle ground between your poetry and your official prose, to join a community that is not the King’s and to communicate with that community in a way that is more reasonable than poetry, more passionate than the King’s English can ever be, more committed to shared sociability and shared vision. Who are you “with” in this world? Who is your extended family? What does your circle of friends want to hear that bears witness to your friendship? There are times when you can answer these questions with a poem. There are times when statements in the King’s English can and must represent this community of yours to the wider world. But there are also times, if a diversity of cultures and communities is to be sustained on this planet, when you need to write for each other in a language that is being invented from day to day in order to develop this sense of belonging to a community. I believe that developing and clarifying this solidarity prose, this language of the in-group, may be necessary to developing your voice as a poet, and may be necessary for improving the very specific precision and tone of your King’s English as well. Conversely, if you grow as a poet and master the King’s English, this prose of your people may emerge over a lifetime and become your most effective channel of communication.
Triple Competence: And/And/And

Peter Elbow

Deep thanks to John Trimbur for inviting me to add a comment to this lovely piece that says so much. Keil says his approach is “both/and”—and it is—but I love his insistence on three. So much academic intellectual thinking is in a one-two rhythm: one/two, one/two, yes/no, either/or. Beat out the rhythm and one beat usually gets the stress. Keil cuts through with an insistent (ostinato) triplet where all three beats get equal emphasis: and/and/and.

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{yes no either or and and and} \\
\end{array} \]

The King’s English. Poetry. The language of one’s home culture.

Keil goes against a common assumption that seems like common sense: “Students already know their home language. And they already know how to go with ‘no rules’ or ‘whatever I put on the page.’ What they don’t know is the King’s English or academic discourse. So that’s what we have to teach.” Keil’s hypothesis could be called counter intuitive or paradoxical, but it has long roots: If people do badly with X, maybe their problem is with Y. If we want students to be better at the King’s English, we’ve got to give attention to other discourses whose weakness is holding back the King’s English: poetry and the home vernacular.

My reading of Keil’s hypothesis centers on his word solidarity—his word for the vernacular of the home culture. One can only write the King’s English from a position of solidarity. Hypothesis: Look closely at writers who are skilled at the King’s English (or academic discourse); Keil suggests that we’ll notice that they write from a stance of solidarity—but a solidarity that doesn’t derive from written King’s English. For no one’s mother tongue or home culture is written in standard English (much less academic discourse). So if we want to help anyone write the King’s English better, we need to help them with solidarity—namely to “develop a prose style for and from her home culture.” (And while they’re at it, “get a copy of The Rattlebag and rattle with the rest of us.”)²
NOTES

1 For more information about participatory consciousness, see Part I of Keil and Feld's *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues*.


BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY CHARLES KEIL


