Teaching Context and Previous Research Findings

WBIS 188: Writing-Based Inquiry Seminar
Theme: Watch Your Language

Unit 1: Language Diversity

• Students choose a topic related to the course theme on which to write a research-based argument. Common topics include slang, regional dialects, telegraphic language, and gender and technology
• Essay topics: How should we think about language standards?
• Reading topics include indigenous language revival, immigrant language, code-switching, and Hip Hop Nation Language
• Key Observations from Literature Review

If our goal is empathy, we need to resist the urge to gloss over differences between our own and others’ experiences.

Megan Boise is critical of “passive empathy,” which “reduces the other to a mirror-identification of oneself, a means of rendering the discomforting other familiar and nonthreatening” (177).

Eric Leake asserts, “Empathy is always at best an approximation of understanding. … Empathy is prone to exploiting differences in circumstances and social positioning. It tends to give the empathizer the benefit of the doubt when ignoring differences and presenting interests, those of the empathizer and the empathized, as converged.”

A deeper, more critical empathy acknowledges difference, complication, and uncertainty.

Leake advocates cultivation of “critical empathy” that “starts with a recognition of unknowability.”

Todd DeStigter describes “critical empathy” as “the process of establishing informal and affective connections with other human beings, of thinking and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant level, while always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociocultural forces that hinder the equitable, just relationships that we presumably seek.” (240).

Traditional thesis-driven academic writing can discourage students from acknowledging and grappling with uncertainty.

Patrick Sullivan contends that a typical “argument-driven assignment … requires students to cultivate an artificial sense of ‘authority’ and ‘mastery’ that ‘ultimately subverts their ability to engage complexity with thoughtfulness, patience, and … respect for uncertainty.’ Instead of focusing solely on crafting persuasive arguments, he argues, students might benefit from exploring questions like ‘What can I say for sure?’ and ‘What are the limits of my knowledge?’” (Sullivan 57).

Hypothesis

Encouraging students to explore the gaps between their own and others’ experiences, and to grapple with uncertainty and the limits of their knowledge, may help to include more reflective writing that asks students to destabilize their arguments and consider the value of alternate perspectives.

The Teaching Intervention

Procedure: Introduce a reflective writing assignment following each thesis-driven essay.

Unit 1 Reflection Prompt

Your essay made a point about how language connects to identity and illustrated that point using our readings. Now that your essay is complete, I’d like to connect it back to yourself by answering these questions:

1. How does the thesis of your essay apply to you personally?
2. What is your experience with language similar to or different from that of the people in the readings you used in your essay? Do those similarities/differences in language reflect similarities/differences in life experience or identity?

Unit 2 Reflection Prompt

In your last reflection, you thought about how the subject matter of your essay applied to you personally, and you compared and contrasted your experiences with those of others. This time, I want you to really focus on the contrasts. Here’s what you should do:

For example, when I’m talking to close friends, I’d be wearing a clown suit because I’m absolutely goofy and ridiculous when I’m some of the things I do. Based on who I’m talking to, I’m going to wear a different costume so to speak when it comes to language. Everyone has their own unique way of speaking.”

Matthews: “I was completely oblivious as to how language plays into who they are. Everyone has their own unique way of speaking.”

Pang: “What frustrates me the most … in some of the readings, and I know it from experience, is that people whose first language isn’t English get somewhat less respect. … When my parents talk to native English speakers I can tell they get frustrated and impatient with my parents.”

Ashley: “I never really thought about how culture had such a strong impact on language, but it makes a lot of sense. … I think about family background, social setting, and culture behind the lens of groups of people in my life and how that has made them into who they are. Everyone has their own unique way of speaking”

Cultivating and Complicating Empathy for Linguistic Difference in a First-Year Writing Class

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A previous study of student learning about linguistic difference indicated a spectrum of learning.

Affirmation and nurturing of existing knowledge
Material interest, connected to everyday lived experience

Now knowledge and understanding
Curiosity. Growth in nervous system of being open and aware of others

Preliminary Observations

Students remain interested in finding commonalities, and sometimes those commonalities are over generalized.

When asked to compare and contrast their experiences with those of the people we have read about, some students will still reach for comparisons that can feel a bit shallow, such as noting that, just as Amy Tan’s mother feels burdened for her “broken” English, they feel judgment for saying “y’all” or “like” or “bubbler.” Yet I feel hopeful that these more shallow comparisons may just pave the way for deeper understanding.

Students readily admit what they do not know or understand when explicitly prompted to do so.

I have always had students write one reflective assignment at the end of the semester, and they almost never address what they do not understand. When explicitly asked to do so, though, like in the Unit 2 Reflection, they do not hesitate.

Students display complex compassion when addressing what they do not know.

Again, I will not quote directly here, but I am encouraged by many of the Unit 2 reflections I have read, in which students who have not experienced linguistic discrimination display a mixture of uncertainty and compassion. They cannot imagine exactly what others’ experiences are like, but they feel the injustice.

Students are unaccustomed to talking about what they do not know, and it can feel strange.

Before turning in her Unit 2 Reflection, one student warned me that it was essentially “a huge rant.” When I read her Unit 2 reflection, I found it both passionate and logical—that I would dismiss a “rant.” I think the disconnect between her description and my read illustrates how unfamiliar a writing experience this was for her.

References


Preliminary Observations, cont.

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