

Samantha Looker-Koenigs

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh • lookers@uwosh.edu

Teaching Context and Previous Research Findings

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

Unit 1: Language & Identity

- Reading topics include indigenous language revival, immigrant language learning, college student slang, Hip-Hop Nation Language
- Essay topic: What does language do for individual and/or group identities?

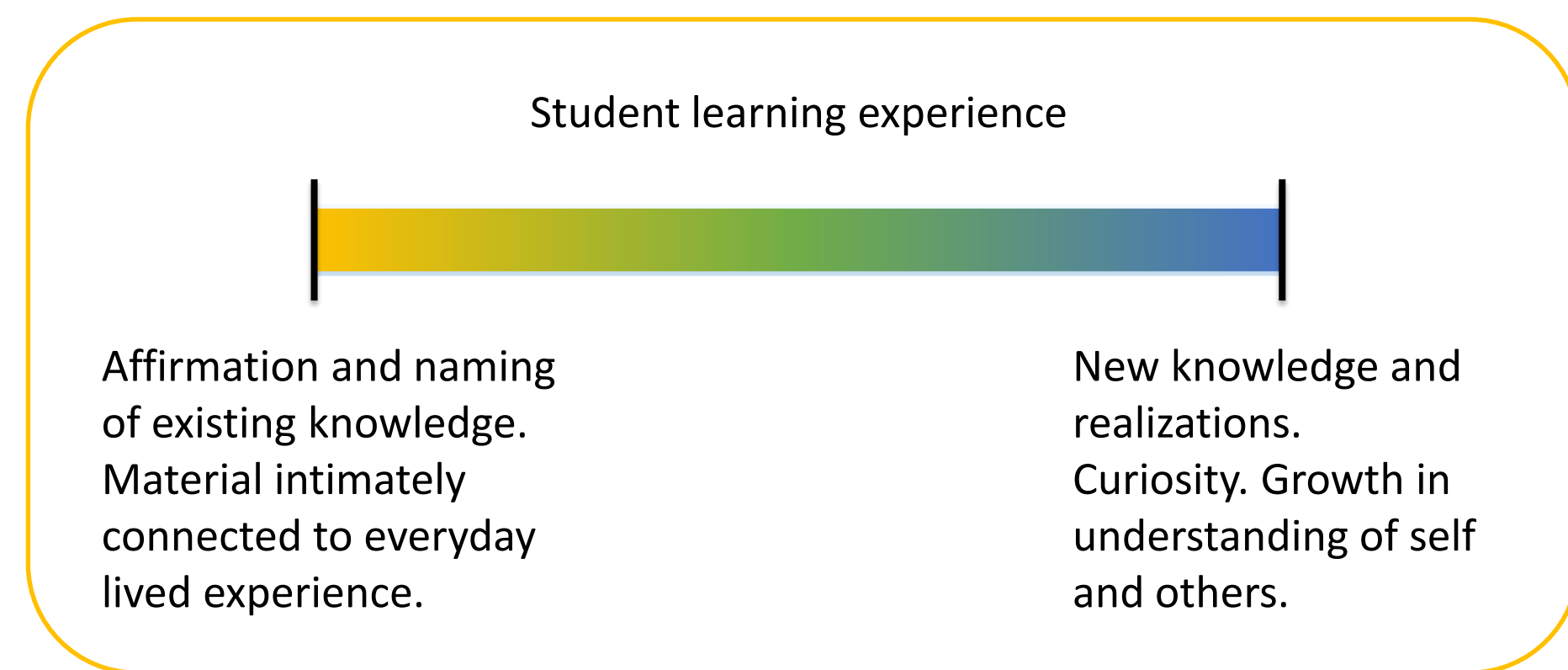
Unit 2: Standards & Judgments

- Reading topics include stereotyping and linguistic prejudice, Standard English, prescriptivism vs. descriptivism
- Essay topics: How should we think about language standards? What's wrong with judging someone based on language?

Unit 3: Independent Research

- Students choose a topic related to the course theme on which to write a research-based argument. Common topics include slang, regional dialects, bilingualism, language and gender, technology and language change, language diversity in the workplace

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



Areia: "We were talking about stuff that I used to have thoughts about but never used to discuss with anybody because... I couldn't really find the vocabulary... Then I was reading and I was like, this is so cool, I already knew this!... I knew what I was thinking had to be true because there's just so much evidence, but... I couldn't find the words I wanted to say to say it."

Matthew: "I was completely oblivious as to how language plays such a pivotal role in my daily life. Now, I understand why I do 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. 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 with them... I've learned that's completely okay and acceptable."

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 various groups of people in my life and how that has made them into who they are. Everyone has their own unique way of speaking."

Teaching and Learning Questions

- How can I bridge gaps between student experience with language diversity and recognize the different stakes that different students have in the discussion?
- How can I encourage deeper empathy for the linguistic experiences of others, particularly among students for whom linguistic diversity is a new topic?

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 Boler 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 informed 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 sociohistorical 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 deepen and complicate students' empathetic growth. Since thesis-driven academic writing can discourage acknowledging uncertainty, it 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 you to connect it back to yourself by answering these two questions:

1. How does the thesis of your essay apply to you personally? Provide at least one concrete example from your own language use to illustrate.
2. In what ways 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 connect to 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:

First, think about whether you consider yourself to be someone who personally faces, or is part of a group that faces, negative judgments or prejudice against their language. With your answer in mind (feel free to write it out as part of your reflection, too, if you like), choose one or both of these questions to discuss:

- What are some questions you would like to ask someone who faces a type of judgment against their language that you haven't experienced? (Maybe you haven't experienced any negative judgments against your language, or maybe you can think about a group you're not part of.) Talk a bit about why you've chosen these questions: Do they connect to your experience, what we read in this unit, or what you wrote in your essay?
- What do you think others struggle to understand about what it's like to be someone who faces linguistic prejudice, if that's something you have experience with? What would you want to tell them, if you could?

Unit 3 Reflection Prompt

Now that you have completed your researched argument essay, I would like you to take a moment to think about what curiosities and uncertainties you still have around your topic. Answer as many of the following questions as you like.

- What questions did you have initially that weren't answered by your research?
- What new questions arose as you progressed through your research?
- If you were asked to continue researching a bit more, what else would you try to find out?
- If you were to move your research beyond the school setting, who might you talk to in order to learn more about your topic? (This could be someone with expertise in the subject or someone with relevant personal experience.)

Preliminary Observations

I am currently teaching my first class with this new reflection sequence. Students have just finished the Unit 2 reflection and are beginning their work on Unit 3. While my Institutional Review Board agreement prevents me from engaging in data analysis until the semester is complete, and thus prevents me from quoting student work here, I will narrate some general observations that I have made as a teacher so far this semester.

Preliminary Observations, cont.

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

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 faced judgment for her "broken English," they face judgment for saying "y'all" or "like" or "bubler." Yet I feel hopeful that these more shallow comparisons may yet 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—nothing that I would dismiss as a "rant." I think the disconnect between her description and my read illustrates how unfamiliar a writing experience this was for her.

References

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- DeStigter, Todd. "Public Displays of Affection: Political Community through Critical Empathy." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 33, 1999, p. 240.
- Leake, Eric. "Writing Pedagogies of Empathy: As Rhetoric and Disposition." *Composition Forum*, vol. 34, 2016.
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