

Provost's Inclusive Teaching Fellowship

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1 Teaching inclusively

What does teaching inclusively mean to you in your teaching context?

Teaching inclusively means creating a safe learning environment and constructing opportunities for all students to engage with the material, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or disability. I have found that implementing inclusive teaching comprises three strategies: (1) course policies, (2) diversity in examples and course content, and (3) contextualizing the discipline. In this application I focus on 80180 *Nature of Language*, the introductory linguistics course, offered through the Philosophy Department. I have taught *Nature of Language* four times (F17, F18, S19, F19), and will be teaching it in both the Fall and Spring semesters of the 2020-2021 academic year.

Course policies This application is about diversifying course content, but first a word must be said about the fact that inclusive pedagogical practices can only be successfully implemented if all students are equally served by course policies. For example, policies that put the onus on the student to approach the professor are likely to disadvantage students from low-resource backgrounds, or students who have traditionally been excluded from academia. As a specific example of this, the late policy on my syllabus used to give the impression that I was not amenable to extensions (though I was), because I wanted to discourage students from “taking advantage” of me. The unintended consequence was that while many students did ask for extensions, a disproportionate number of African American, Latinx, and first-generation students did not, for fear of confirming any potential negative stereotypes that I, their white professor, might have of them.

In Fall 2019 I changed the late policy by effectively removing it entirely: all students were entitled to one 72-hour, no-questions-asked extension, and I told students that if they needed to submit any additional assignments late, all they had to do was ask and it would be granted. Moreover, I emphasised that it was okay to ask for an extension even at the last minute, and if they missed the deadline entirely, I encouraged them to see me with a promise that we would work things out. While this policy does still require students to approach me, I kept this in place because I wanted to know if any students were systematically failing to keep up with the deadlines, so that I could have a conversation with them about what resources and support they might need to better manage their workload. My experience with this policy in Fall 2019 was decidedly positive. First, there was marked improvement in submission rates amongst all my students, and I did not notice the demographic skew in non-submission rates as before. Second, and contrary to the “received wisdom” of classroom management, students did not “take advantage” of me; students generally submitted their work on time, and in fact only two students (of approximately 100) asked for an extension after the first one.

Course policies are important because no matter how diverse the content is, if students are not submitting work, and thus not engaging with the material, they're not learning it.

Course content Because language intersects all areas of human society and culture, there are many opportunities for students to engage with material that is directly relevant to them. In particular, an introductory linguistics course is a natural venue through which to explore discrimination, oppression (both historical and current), prestige and stigma; indeed, these concepts are hinted at even on the first day, when students are introduced to the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive statements about language. Prescriptive statements, such as “You shouldn't use double negatives”, are the purview of traditional grammars, and are normative statements about how language ought to be used, often (but not always) expressed by speakers of high-prestige dialects with access to institutional power and resources. In contrast, linguistics is concerned with how people actually use language, and so generates descriptive statements such as “In the West Texas dialect of English, the sentence *Nobody ain't doin' nothin' wrong* is grammatical” (<https://ygdg.yale.edu/phenomena/negative-concord>). The contrast between prescriptivism and

descriptivism thus forms a natural foundation on which to build discussions of linguistic discrimination, prestige, and stigma.

Over the past four semesters that I have taught *Nature of Language*, I have worked to incorporate such issues throughout the course. Some examples:

- We consider Gawker’s infamous “ugliest accent” competition in 2014, discussing the fact that only accents associated with speakers of lower socioeconomic classes are deemed “ugly” (Pittsburgh was the “winner” of that tournament).
- In teaching syntactic variation, I illustrate the rule-governed and nuanced nature of various constructions from low-prestige dialects, such as African American English or Southern US English, thereby illustrating that grammatical variation is not due to “laziness” or a lack of sophistication.
- Lessons about acquisition naturally lead to the critical period of language acquisition, providing opportunities to discuss the language deprivation congenitally deaf children born to hearing parents are faced with, and leads naturally into discussions of sign language representation in the media.
- In teaching about modes of phonation in phonetics and phonology, I dispel myths about “vocal fry”, and we discuss how criticisms of vocal fry are disproportionately levelled against women, even though men exhibit vocal fry at comparable rates.

The above examples are all well-integrated into the “core” course material, in that they serve as additional illustrations of standardly taught linguistic concepts. In my experience, such examples are generally well-received by students: as but one example, one of my students had attended a special programme in high school to eradicate vocal fry (and other markers of her variety of the Californian dialect) from her speech, where she had been taught many of the myths that I dispel in my class—she was relieved to learn that she hadn’t permanently damaged her vocal folds! Additionally, these examples illustrate an important component of what teaching inclusively means in my teaching context: students who take *Nature of Language* leave the class with the ability to recognise linguistic and language-based discrimination, and more importantly have the tools to marshal arguments against it. In other words, teaching linguistics inclusively is intended to have ramifications beyond my course.

Contextualizing the discipline Not all topics provide such rich fodder for tackling language-based discrimination; for example, what could possibly be said about the 19th century discovery of Proto-Indo-European (PIE), the mother language from which many European languages had descended, including Latin, Greek, German, and French? It turns out, quite a bit. Early linguists who worked on PIE were encouraged by the fact that they had discovered a proto-language that was not Semitic (crucially neither Arabic nor Jewish), and in fact, the discovery of PIE contributed to the early formation of the Aryan movement (Goldsmith and Laks, 2019). Thus, while the scientific basis of PIE is sound, its history is marred by how it was interpreted. Perhaps not so egregiously, but still a point of controversy, is that quite a bit of linguistic fieldwork is/was funded by Christian missionary organizations, with objectives that may not be in line with promoting ethnic and religious diversity.

Examples such as these serve to illustrate to students that although science is, in principle, objective, science is practiced by individuals who themselves have different motivations, ideologies, and beliefs, and so the practice of science is rarely neutral. This is well-known amongst some students, particularly those who have directly experienced the result of biased engineering practices because their accent or skin colour was not recognised by some speech or facial recognition device. For those students who are generally privileged, these kinds of examples can be eye-opening, and hopefully push them to consider experimental and engineering design as they continue in their degrees and future careers.

2 Motivation

What motivates you to undertake this fellowship?

It is easy to feel good about being inclusive in the linguistics classroom: as mentioned previously, introductory courses teach students to distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive grammatical statements, and most linguists that I know of devote at least some class time to looking at the grammar of at least one low-prestige dialect. However, as argued in Charity Hudley et al. (2018), “As a predominantly white discipline rooted in a liberal, Boasian¹ rejection of scientific racism, linguistics struggles to confront its role in reproducing racism” (pg. 6). In other words, linguistics as a field has a lot of work to do, and in this I am no exception.

There are two major areas of growth with respect to teaching inclusively that I hope to address through this fellowship. The first is to explicitly incorporate the voices of underrepresented scholars in linguistics, with particular focus on Indigenous and African American scholars. The second is to integrate such content more fully into assignments, and create activities that involve all students. Both are described more fully in Section 4.

Professionally speaking, undertaking a fellowship in inclusive teaching aligns well with two recent initiatives of the *Linguistic Society of America* (LSA), the flagship professional organization of linguistics in the United States. These initiatives are (1) an official statement on race (approved May 2019), and (2) a grant devoted to the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (SoTL), which I am involved in as one of the inaugural members of the Faculty Learning Community (co-PIs are Dr. Kazuko Hiramatsu and Dr. Michal Temkin Martínez).

My motivation for pursuing this fellowship is thus both professional and personal. Cultivating an inclusive classroom that is explicitly anti-racist, and working within the professional aspirations of the LSA, are important to my growth as a linguist, scholar, and teacher. But, perhaps more importantly, I see this work as truly important: only a handful of scholars are likely to read any given academic paper I write, but in teaching *Nature of Language*, I have the opportunity to impact over 100 students every semester. For those students who will continue their studies in linguistics or related language sciences, it is imperative that they receive an education that contextualizes the discipline, so that they, as future scholars, move the field in a more inclusive and equitable direction. For those who will not continue studies in linguistics—the majority in *Nature of Language*—incorporating material that explicitly confronts racism, prejudice and discrimination, prestige and stigma, is arguably the most important content that they will learn in the course. If a white CMU student who believes (even if only subconsciously) that a peer student who says “aks” instead of “ask” is intellectually deficient in some way, rather than simply a speaker of a different dialect, then these students will not engage as equals to the detriment of the student without privilege and to the detriment of the university community as an inclusive space. This same lesson about understanding difference extends beyond the classroom to society as a whole, in interactions in the workplace, in public spaces, in the criminal justice system, etc.

3 Description of target course

A description of the target course and how it fits into the curriculum (What level? What students? What discipline? When is it going to be taught?)

Nature of Language is a 100-level course, offered by the Department of Philosophy. The course is taught every semester, and has a current cap of 120 students. It functions as a general education requirement, and so the course attracts students from all disciplines, and indeed over half of the students are enrolled in a STEM major of some kind.

Because of its status as a popular general education requirement, *Nature of Language* is an ideal course in which to implement inclusive teaching strategies as discussed in the previous two sections. Feedback from students (both through FCEs and unofficial methods of feedback) has shown me that students not only appreciate the material, but, for many of them, it’s rare to see issues related to discrimination and

¹Franz Boas, considered the “father of American Anthropology”, was one of the most prominent opponents of the ideology of scientific racism that was particularly popular in the 19th century.

oppression in their classes. For example, I've had graduating seniors in Engineering or CS tell me that *Nature of Language* is the only time they have been asked to think about such issues in their entire university education.

4 Diversifying course content and particular challenges

Please describe what you would like to explore in terms of diversifying your course content and particular challenges you would like to solve.

There are two main threads that I would like to explore in terms of diversifying course content. First, I plan to incorporate the work of linguists from underrepresented groups, with a particular focus on Indigenous and African American scholars. Second, I plan to continue work that I have already begun in consultation with the Eberly Center to design activities and assessments that more fully engage students with course content that touches upon linguistic discrimination and oppression.

The current version of *Nature of Language* uses a wide range of languages to illustrate linguistic phenomena, and such examples are presented in what most linguists would deem “neutral”, “scientific” terms. For example, in a lesson on word order variation, I might use the phrase “the blue car” from English to illustrate an adjective-noun order, and “la voiture bleu” from French to illustrate a noun-adjective order. That is, the examples are presented as isolated phenomena, divorced from the culture of the people who speak that language. This is in line with the mainstream view of how to approach the scientific study of language, and how I was trained in linguistics.

Conspicuously absent from the presentation of these examples is the question of how such data are collected. The question seems silly to ask of English or French data, but what about examples from endangered languages such as Yawelmani (central California), Resígaro (Peru), or Ilue (Nigeria)? Even putting aside cases where linguistic data has been collected by missionary organizations, or data collected during the colonial period, to what extent are language documentation and revitalization efforts sensitive to the needs of Indigenous communities? By failing to even address this question in *Nature of Language*, I am committing two sins, one scientific, and one political. First, it is a basic tenet of scientific discourse to discuss where data come from and how they were procured, because these are some of the metrics by which we determine the data's reliability. Second, and more importantly, as a non-Indigenous scholar, deciding what is and isn't relevant to teach about Indigenous languages is a way of upholding colonial legacies and elevating Western ideas over Indigenous ones (Leonard, 2017, 2018). My interest in the representation of Indigenous languages in the classroom is motivated by recent conversations with my SoTL colleague, Dr. Wesley Leonard, about Indigenous epistemologies and the decolonization of linguistics. In particular, Dr. Leonard advances the thesis that diversifying course content with respect to language isn't just about presenting examples from many different languages, but also about presenting different communities' views about what language *is*.

In a similar vein, although low and high prestige languages and dialects are considered equal from the linguist's point of view, they are not treated equally from the linguist-as-academic's point of view. This is a point that I explicitly raise with my students in a class discussion titled, “Am I a hypocrite?”, which I kick off by asking students whether I would accept essays written in non-standard dialects. This discussion is always interesting, because while everyone agrees that there need to be sufficient conventions to ensure shared understanding, the idea that a professor ought to care about a student's use of double negatives is decidedly less convincing when viewed in light of how such conventions uphold institutionalized racism and white supremacy.

This leads me to the second challenge that I wish to address through the fellowship: how do I design effective assignments and classroom activities that challenge students to think about difficult issues related to language and linguistics in a manner appropriate to a large class, and in ways that are sensitive to all students? Until recently, I have been loathe to create assessments related to these topics because I did not want any student to feel that they had to parrot my views in order to get an A. In Fall 2019, in consultation with Dr. Jessica Harrell at the Eberly Center, I created an optional assignment that asked students to reflect upon some of the issues raised over the course of the semester, and it was generally well done and well received. I plan to continue work in this vein as part of the fellowship.

5 Enhancing student outcomes

How will diversifying your course content enhance student outcomes (learning, engagement, and/or attitudes)? Which benefit(s) do you see as the most important, and why?

I anticipate that diversifying the course content will enhance student outcomes across the board—that is, learning, engagement, and attitudes—but the relative strength of those benefits will be different for different groups of students.

In diversifying the course content and incorporating the voices the underrepresented scholars in my field, I hope to deemphasize my role as the sole authority in the room. I believe that this is particularly important for students who are speakers of marginalized languages and dialects, who are being asked to learn about linguistic oppression from their white professor who is a native speaker of a non-stigmatized language with considerable socioeconomic privilege. By incorporating the voices of underrepresented scholars, I hope that such students will be more engaged with the material.

The fact that I explicitly tackle difficult issues related to language and linguistics appears to be generally well received, as evidenced by numerous comments to that effect on FCEs and other notes that my students send me. Nevertheless, every semester I receive one FCE comment that expresses displeasure that I “push my own views”. It is my hope that by presenting a broader basis of scholarship related to linguistic discrimination and oppression, students will come to understand both the scientific consensus and ongoing debates regarding such issues, thereby contextualizing the thesis I advance in class. For students who are currently turned off by these issues, it is my hope that this approach will improve their attitude to the material.

As mentioned previously, the current version of *Nature of Language* does not require students to submit any assessment related to linguistic discrimination and oppression, and so, aside from comments that my students volunteer, I have no way of knowing if they are in fact learning the material. Therefore, from the perspective of student outcomes, diversifying course content in the form of implementing activities and assessments is sure to enhance learning, or, at the very least, will tell me if students are not, in fact, learning.

6 Expectations

What are your expectations for this program? Specifically, what do you wish to gain from interacting with a cohort of faculty Fellows and from collaborating with Eberly consultants on your project?

Most concretely, I expect that working with Eberly consultants on this project will lead to the creation of assessments and activities related to issues of linguistic discrimination and oppression. In addition to being used every semester in teaching *Nature of Language*, such materials may eventually form the basis of pedagogical studies designed to explicitly test how diversifying course materials in the linguistics classroom improves student outcomes.

I anticipate that being part of a cohort of faculty Fellows would provide many opportunities to learn about how other disciplines tackle questions pertaining to race, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, and disability. Furthermore, I expect that regular meetings with other faculty Fellows invested in teaching inclusively will push me to think critically about my own methods. In order to teach inclusively, one must teach reflectively, and so I would be very excited for the opportunity to be part of such a cohort.

References

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