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FINDING BELONGING THROUGH CURRICULAR AND PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIP IN A FIRST-YEAR COURSE ON LINGUISTIC JUSTICE

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During the summer of 2023, we developed First-Year Tutorial at Grinnell College on the new topic of Linguistic Justice. The goal of the partnership was to create a syllabus, teaching materials, and assignments for the Fall course, and while it succeeded in this regard, this faculty-student collaboration also created a much-needed sense of belonging for both of us. At the time the partnership began, we were both feeling uneasy about our roles at Grinnell College, and we were each struggling with our educational and professional decisions, even as we were inspired by the kind of work that linguistic justice invited us to do.

In working together to design a course, we immediately found that our shared goals and excitement about a burgeoning discipline allowed us to also work together to address our individual and shared concerns about our educational identities. Our different identities as professor and student were not a barrier to be bridged; rather, they were intentional, complementary areas of expertise that were equally crucial in crafting a successful and engaging first-year course. In this essay, we will reflect on our experience to demonstrate how curricular and pedagogical partnerships can break down the traditional epistemic hierarchies that define higher education, providing both faculty and students with a new perspective on their roles and increasing their feeling of institutional belonging.

Tim: When I decided to offer a First-Year Tutorial on the topic of Linguistic Justice, I recognized a few immediate challenges. First, this is not my area of expertise, as I have no formal training in linguistics and my primary field of teaching and research is in medieval English literature. Therefore, developing a course focused on African-American language practices would require a significant amount of preparation. Second, most students do not get any formal training in linguistics in high school, so they would need to learn a lot of concepts, terminology, and the International Phonetic Alphabet very quickly in order to set up socio-linguistic discussions. Third, since Linguistic Justice is a relatively new practice and methodology, spurred by April Baker-Bell's 2020 monograph *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* (Routledge Press), I would need to read much of the recent scholarship for the first time, and I would need help processing this material before I felt prepared to teach the course. Because I need help with the content rather than the mechanics of the course, I felt that I needed a curricular and pedagogical partner who already had significant experience with linguistics and who shared a passion for doing the work that Linguistic Justice demands.

While one option would have been to co-teach with another faculty member, partnering with a student would allow me to approach all of these issues with a student perspective always at the

forefront. Also, since linguistic justice invites us to rethink our approaches to language and writing pedagogies, I wanted a student to hold me accountable and keep me from relying on the habits and norms that have brought about the need for linguistic justice in the first place.

Lilli: When one of my dear friends forwarded me Professor Arner’s job listing for this pedagogical partnership, I immediately responded, “Wait... so he’s teaching a class on my major?” After a year and a half of trying to fit square pegs into round holes, forcing myself into various departments where I didn’t feel inspired, I had recently declared an independent major in Critical Linguistics. This self-designed course of study, focusing on sociolinguistics, critical theory, and linguistic imperialism, allowed me to pursue exactly what I loved and was most interested in; however, in doing so, it further alienated me at an institution where I already felt socially isolated. Despite jobs and extracurriculars, my transition to college after a COVID gap year was lonely and difficult: I struggled to feel like I truly “belonged” anywhere or brought anything of value to the proverbial table. While I was immensely grateful for the opportunity to construct my own major, it left me without an academic department or learning community, which was especially challenging after I’d spent my first two years of college constantly asking myself if I had made the right choice. I loved my school academically, but my senses of purpose and connection were minimal. It was a means to an end, an environment that I tolerated as part of the transaction of obtaining an education.

After I was formally offered the partnership, I remember calling my mom in tears because I was faced with what seemed like an impossible decision: I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study exactly what I was passionate about—marginalized language varieties, sociolinguistics, and linguistic discrimination—=with a similarly motivated professor, but it meant staying for an entire summer in a place that sometimes felt like it was sucking the life out of me. In weighing my love for the subject and my aversion to the setting, I determined that my enthusiasm for linguistic justice was determinate, but the experience of staying for three extra months was indeterminate: I could hypothesize all I wanted, but I wouldn’t know how I truly felt unless I tried it. Ultimately, I decided to take the risk and prioritize my passion for learning, and I am infinitely glad that I did.

Tim: My approach to Linguistic Justice is very much informed by my work with the history of the English language in the Old, Middle, and Modern English periods. I had been teaching English Historical Linguistics at Grinnell College since 2010, and I had developed a number of resources and teaching tools to help students understand how the English language had evolved from the sixth through the sixteenth century. That course dedicated most of its time to how English developed in England and only some time to American usage, and I wanted the Linguistic Justice Tutorial to focus on Black English in the American context. It would require a lot of preparation to explore and synthesize the historical, cultural, and geographic factors that influence Black English in the U.S.: the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the significance of the Caribbean islands as part of that trade, laws and codes governing Black speech during the pre-Civil War era, the Great Migration, and the role of mass media in shaping attitudes toward Black English.

Lilli and I met twice a week throughout the summer to brainstorm topics, discuss readings, and plan the trajectory of the course. We agreed early in the process on the need for two major units: we would discuss recent scholarship on the anti-Black linguistic bias that played a significant role in the trial of George Zimmerman for his murder of Trayvon Martin, and we need to present a history and linguistic overview of Black language practices in the United States. As Lilli and I began to explore this topic, we decided to center that presentation on Gullah, a language spoken by the African-American population living off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, which has remained fairly constant since the 19th century and retains many features of the Niger-Congo language spoken by enslaved people transported to the Americas. Focusing on Gullah would be an ideal way to introduce the debate between the creolist and Anglicist hypotheses regarding the development of Black English in the U.S., illustrate the presence of Niger-Congo influences on Black English, and show how geographic, political, and social forces influence language usage.

The importance of this linguistic and social community became obvious, as did the challenge of preparing to teach a language system with which we were not particularly familiar. While this would be a crucial part of the course, there were still a range of other topics that needed to be planned in a limited amount of time. If I were designing the course on my own, I would not have had enough time to delve deeply into the Gullah language or culture, but with Lilli as my curricular and pedagogical partner, she could spend the time required to prepare a detailed presentation on this topic while I focused on the linguistic consequences of the Great Migration.

Lilli: My underlying experience and research interests within linguistic justice stemmed primarily from my independent major in Critical Linguistics. In linguistic terms, my major revolved around the study of prestige, or why some language varieties and ways of speaking are considered superior/of a higher status than others. Unsurprisingly, the answer to this normally lies in some kind of greater societal prejudice. As such, I had encountered discussion of the nuances of antiblack linguistic racism in my reading prior to my work on linguistic justice, and I was interested both its intangible and tangible effects: intangible as in the psychological ramifications of living in a world that is constantly invalidating and attempting to eliminate your native tongue; tangible as in how speakers of Black English are denied jobs, housing, and fair trials due to antiblack linguistic racism.

In our work constructing this course, I was highly intentional about the way that I discussed these effects. It was important to me to state that these were due to linguistic racism, not due to the speakers speaking a stigmatized variety—a person's use of Black English does not magically deny them housing, it is another individual (or group, or society)'s racism and subsequent action that produces these consequences. In other words, these outcomes have less to do with the speaker and their actual language patterns than the identities that those patterns index for a (prejudiced) listener; additionally, these outcomes are not inevitable or somehow inherent to the language, and a linguistic justice framework is a path towards minimizing these negative effects altogether.

Beyond sociolinguistics and linguistic bias, I held a significant prior research interest in contact languages, such as pidgins and creoles. The displacement and forced migration of enslaved African people resulted in the genesis of a number of creole and pidgin languages in the

Caribbean and beyond, including Gullah on the southeastern coast of the U.S. in the 18th century. Due to my experience studying contact languages and my interest in Gullah's effect on modern Black English, I decided to delve deep into Gullah, creating an hour-long presentation on its history and evolution in addition to its morphology, phonology, and syntactic structures, as well as how some of those can still be found in Black English today.

In researching for this presentation and everything else in the course, it was important to me to use academically unorthodox resources and platform a variety of voices. Naturally, I looked at peer-reviewed journal articles during my process, but I also integrated oral histories, documentaries, songs, and more. This had the combined effect of making the coursework more rich and engaging for students with a variety of learning styles while simultaneously ensuring that our discussion of linguistic justice was more than just lip service: teaching about linguistic justice in a classroom setting is essentially a moot point if all of the sources used to do so are from the same exclusive, hegemonic academic authorities that the framework seeks to disrupt. Including things like a video of traditional Gullah Geechee ring shout singing helped to contextualize Gullah as a living language practice that has influenced musical traditions that students may be more familiar with, like blues and jazz; meanwhile, examining the BBC News Pidgin page showed how other English-lexified contact languages with similarities to Gullah are still widely used in areas of West Africa. Using a variety of mediums to tell the story of Gullah was crucial to stay true to its robust and complex history, and validating different epistemologies through our source material was integral to the mission of linguistic justice as a whole.

Tim: As the age gap widens between me and my students, I have become aware of the ways in which our sense of history becomes more disparate; for example, the 1990s mean two very different things to those of us who came of age during that decade and those born a few years after the start of a new millennium. So, as it came time to select course readings, I found it very helpful to have Lilli's perspective on what first-year students might find most interesting and accessible. This was particularly helpful when considering two excellent monographs on Black English by Geneva Smitherman, a preeminent scholar in the field. Prof. Smitherman first published *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* in 1977, and in 2006 she issued *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans*. Both books discuss the linguistic history and features of Black English, with the later book updating the former with references to the rise of hip hop as a significant part of American and global culture.

While either of these books would work for the course, I preferred *Talkin and Testifyin'*, partially because it so perfectly illustrates how the debates about Black English that take place today are largely the same conversations being had 50 years ago, and I wanted to consider the lack of progress in this area. I worried, however, that the book would feel old to my students because it lacked more recent references and some of its examples of Black slang are no longer current.

To determine which book to assign, I asked Lilli to read both and give me her impression on how our students might respond to each. Her input was immensely valuable as she pointed out the ways in which *Word from the Mother* actually felt a bit more outdated than *Talkin and Testifyin'* because of, not despite, its more recent but also no-longer-current examples. Without Lilli's consultation, I might have defaulted to the more recent book with the assumption that it would

feel more timely, but we assigned *Talkin and Testifyin'* and it was very well-received by our Gen-Z students.

Lilli: In reviewing potential course content, I quickly realized that in order to maximize student buy-in, it was important to focus on either presenting materials that felt timeless and retained their relevance—such as *Talkin and Testifyin'*—or presenting temporally specific materials with discussion of their temporal context (even if that context is the present moment). This means discussing the sociopolitical climate of 1967 when reading an article from that year, but it also means not assigning an article with very 2008 references and trying to pass it off as current. Your students will notice, and it will affect how they absorb the information.

For instance, one potential reading for our introduction to linguistics unit provided a respectable overview of linguistic concepts, but it also contained a discussion of neologisms and supposedly new “instant messaging” language that included such gems as “KTHXBAI,” “AFK” (“away from keyboard”) and “LMSO” (“laughing my socks off”). It did not matter how well-executed the rest of the chapter was—this passage placed it blatantly in 2013, a fact that was obvious to me and no doubt would have been even more distracting to our 18-year-old students.

In a case like this, rather than seek literature with more up-to-date references, it was more effective for us to just find a different reading (from the same book, in fact!) that provided an overview of linguistics but excluded language that tied it to any specific moment in time, as these references lent very little to a student’s understanding of basic linguistic concepts. Instead, we chose to use identifiably recent readings when they were actually relevant—in our discussion of the role that linguistic racism played in the George Zimmerman trial, for instance, or when we learned about the semantic bleaching of the term “woke.”

As a student with no teaching experience, I went into the course design process assuming my own ignorance, but I soon realized that I knew much more than I had previously thought. During the “Teaching and Learning Together” conference at Grinnell College, I listened to past student pedagogical partners discuss what they brought to the table in their partnerships and their unexpected pockets of knowledge, and it quickly dawned on me that I, as a student, shared these areas of expertise. While the actual process of creating a course was completely new (and incredibly informative!) to me, I found that I actually had a strong grasp of course design in terms of effectively structuring a schedule, balancing amounts of work assigned, determining classroom policies, and lots more due to the simple fact that I’ve taken a lot of college courses very recently. I have been assigned four semesters’ worth of course syllabi and, based on the progressions of the courses that they were assigned for, can outline what worked and what didn’t. I was struck by the realization that college and university faculty, despite interacting with each other on a daily basis, often have no idea what their coworkers’ syllabi look like and how their courses are taught, and felt lucky to be able to provide a window into that.

In addition to my proficiency in contact languages and linguistics, I had recent, first-hand knowledge regarding how content should be organized and delivered to a student audience. This was the first time I’ve ever felt like my knowledge was valued not just as a burgeoning scholar, but explicitly as a student – often in settings like undergraduate research, undergraduate status is

viewed as a hindrance to be overlooked, but in this context, it was beneficial and valuable. Professor Arner is an expert in being a professor, and I'm an expert in being a student. Course design is about maximizing understanding and interaction between those two parties.

Conclusion

Lilli: This partnership taught me so, so much about how courses are designed and implemented, from big-picture semester planning to the minutiae of individual assignments. More than anything, however, I emerged from this process with a newfound understanding of the fallacy of epistemic hierarchies, a profound appreciation for the symbiotic nature of the teaching-learning process, and a transformed sense of belonging at my institution. Professor Arner did not make me feel like he was a supervisor and I an assistant; rather, I felt for the first time like a true collaborator who had expertise (albeit in different areas than his) that was valuable and important to share. Especially as someone who lacks an academic department, I often felt like I was drifting, without anything tying me down to my institution. Participating in this pedagogical partnership gave me an immeasurable sense of buy-in and ownership over my own education: I felt like I had a reason to be here and that I had created something of value that would go on to hopefully enrich other students' lives as well.

Our teaching and learning process was not a binary exchange but an inextricably mutual creative project, resulting in a shared understanding that was greater than the sum of its parts. I emerged inspired to create more academic environments like this one and encouraged to make my education work for me, not the other way around.

Tim: After working at an institution for fifteen years, it seems strange to still be wondering where, or even if, you belong. But my career trajectory has involved not only a move from full-time teaching in the English department to six years of full-time administrative work as an Associate Dean but also a shift in research and teaching from medieval studies to linguistic justice. This partnership opportunity arrived at a crucial moment for me; as I was returning to the classroom to teach a new course and entering my final year as an Associate Dean, I found myself at a mid-career crossroads and trying to manage the attendant anxieties.

Working with Lilli helped me focus and allowed me to talk through my various concerns, and the excitement generated by our conversations about the course built my confidence in what we were going to attempt. The success of our course reassured me that this new direction in my teaching and scholarship is a very positive move for myself and, I believe, for our institution, since the mission of linguistic justice is to create a sense of belonging among diverse speakers of English, which is necessary for our students to thrive. I found our pedagogy partnership to be both grounding and uplifting, creating an ideal intellectual and emotional space for educational innovation.