

## ESSAYS

# Toward the Co-Construction of Assessment: Equity, Language Ideology and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy at the Community College

—Jason M. Leggett

Jason M. Leggett, Assistant Professor, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Kingsborough Community College, [Jason.leggett@kbcc.cuny.edu](mailto:Jason.leggett@kbcc.cuny.edu)

### Abstract

Many institutional assessment frameworks endorse the Standard Language Myth (de Cuba & Slocum, 2020). Yet, linguistic research has established that “no variety of a language is inherently better in terms of its logic, its systematic structure, or its ability to express creative and complex thought,” (Reaser et al. 2017, p. 3). In this reflective essay, I examine how I encountered an educational structure of assessment that constructed obstacles to culturally sustaining instruction and describe how I tried to co-construct a new framework with students. Paris and Alim (2017) argue that culturally sustaining practices (CSP) must be a part of a shifting culture of power that challenges White middle-class linguistic, literate and cultural skills and ways of being. I wanted to decenter the Standard Language Myth, co-construct a process with students that might challenge hegemonic knowledge production, and make space for multiple ways of being. I found a tendency among educators to see the rubric as a neutral or objective tool. I realized that it would become necessary to break the mold of what a rubric meant to share this power with students. It is impossible to recognize and implement culturally sustaining pedagogies without engaged dialogue with the people who experience and practice culture in their own lives. This includes our peers in our structured assessment environments. Our assessment strategies must be radial; they must include student’s lived experiences and varied ways of expression throughout the entire educational process.

### Key terms.

Equity, Assessment, Rubrics, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies, High-Impact-Practices, Learning Communities, Threshold Concepts, Community Colleges.

### Knowledge Production

I was sitting at my computer organizing my course for the upcoming semester when I received an email about an institution-wide assessment plan. A department representative had been chosen as the assessor and they had solicited assessment rubrics specific to written and verbal communication for specified courses. I groaned aloud as I realized that the course I had been assigned coincided with this college-wide liberal arts self-study, and that I had to assess the learning outcome of “supporting conclusions with evidence.”

Over the next two months, many emails were exchanged in what at times felt like a virtual pinball game. At first, the resistance from many of my colleagues was focused on the timing of the assessment. Many felt that this was not the right time to conduct an assessment and joked there might never be a good time. Others shared that they did not use rubrics, so they did not know how they could be helpful. A few mentioned that they were not grading students in the traditional sense, so they could not suddenly develop a new practice. The assessor persisted and shared examples of rubrics and repeated the plea for us to develop a common rubric. There were numerous exchanges over several more weeks and there was a lot of discussion about what type of rubric would be best for this sort of assessment. Ultimately, the assessor provided a single rubric to review which emphasized standard American English usage. The institutional assessment environment that I was operating in perpetuated a myth that there was only one right way to speak and write English.

The context for developing a common assessment was, in this case, an example of latent language ideology

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

because it endorsed the Standard Language Myth as described by Lippi-Green (2012). This is the belief that there exists one proper form of English that is superior to all other varieties of English, and that any deviance from the standard form represents a linguistic deficit, or a lesser form of the language (de Cuba and Slocum, 2020). There is no scientific basis for this erroneous belief. An abundance of linguistic research has established that “no variety of a language is inherently better in terms of its logic, its systematic structure, or its ability to express creative and complex thought,” (Reaser et al. 2017, p. 3).

I began with a broad inquiry: How does an educational structure of assessment construct obstacles to culturally sustaining instruction and what can be done about it? By structure, I mean the interpretive context of the situation including the unequal power relationships over time. In this case, the power of the administrators influenced the assessor who in turn attempted to influence the faculty. There are also ongoing unequal power relations among the faculty based on rank, experience, and influence. The structure also includes: the set of positions that each of us actually put forward in any given moment, the possible actions each of us can take at any given time in the assessment process, the possible outcomes as each of us tries to influence the process, the amount of information available and the type presented, as well as the costs and benefits for chosen actions and those not taken (Ostrom, 1986).

I am mostly focused on the widespread use of the Standard Language Myth, as a vehicle for assessment, and as a form of domination in these structures. The imposition of metrics from above in the grading process is an example of an inherently unequal structure. The costs for resisting this structure are high; resistance involves additional work, confrontation at meetings, and the possibility of future costs from the assessor, colleagues, and administrators. The benefits for going along with the assessor include limited work, appearing to be supportive of the assessment process, and getting back to things that are more important to the faculty member. This structure creates a context where any resistance to the Standard Language Myth will be seen as rebellion against the process.

The implementation of the common assessment rubric in my experience both explicitly referenced the

Standard Language Myth and implied that the educator holds a special privilege of knowing the proper usage of English. Together, this assessment structure encourages the faculty to police student errors. This is problematic to anyone interested in equitable teaching and learning. The common-sense nature of this ideology is particularly relevant to operationalizing equity across programs. Inequitable assessment practices will yield inequitable teaching practices. As I went through the assessment process, I first attempted to deconstruct the inequitable assessment structure and then tried to reconstruct a more equitable assessment practice. I wanted to see whether my own individual experience with culturally responsive instruction might be influential in my resistance to the Standard Language Myth promoted within my assessment group.

### **Framework: Culturally Responsive Teaching, Sustaining Practices, and BlackCrit**

I have written about culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as it relates to the implementation of technology (Leggett, 2016), community-based projects (Leggett, Wen & Chatman, 2018), and critical media literacy (Leggett & King-Reilly, 2020). In each of those pieces, I have tried to provide a roadmap for the implementation of CRT as a pragmatic shift toward more equitable and inclusive learning environments. I used experimental methods to analyze the impact of CRT in response to emerging problems. I believe that in each pragmatic implementation there were also theoretical insights that were developed that can expand our understanding of the co-production of knowledge.

This co-production of knowledge is important to work up against the more pernicious production of hegemonic knowledge centered on the educator as gatekeeper or master. Hegemonic knowledge production is that which sustains irreconcilable division of particularistic experience against general collective truths and abstractions constructed to contain those experiences (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). In this case, the educator as gatekeeper is taken to be a common-sense rule: it is the job of the educator to assimilate students into White middle class standard of speaking and writing English.

CRT decenters the power of two sources of hegemonic knowledge production: the educator as knowledge-

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

holder and the more mysterious knowledge produced by objective, undefined sources held out to be authoritative. However, Paris and Alim (2017) argue that CRT does not do enough to explicitly support the goals of maintenance and social critique. Instead, culturally sustaining practices (CSP) must be a part of a shifting culture of power that challenges White middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills, and other ways of being. Simply put, CSP decenters hegemonic knowledge production, but it also makes room for multiethnic knowledge co-construction.

Hegemonic knowledge production is also related to a persistently stubborn historical problem in education: the policing of students. Many times, this policing targets students of color through affective behavior including attendance policies, dress codes, and other ways of being in the classroom. This policing can also take on a linguistic component particularly when it advances the needs, self-interests, and racial privileges of whites (Baker-Bell, 2020).

It is likely that these policing practices are not intentional nor driven by ill motives. Rather, they are the legacy of most educators' own experiences as well as common practices and routines across a department or institution. For example, most of us have experienced an educator or family member who was quick to correct our speech or point out a flaw. Critical feedback is not necessarily harmful; however, when coupled with historical systemic inequities and situational unequal power relations, educators should proceed cautiously and with some reflection. It is too easy to move into a mindset whereby we identify deficits in students who engage in behaviors, including academic, that are different from our own. Assessment practices need to move beyond policing, decenter hegemonic knowledge production, and make room for multiethnic perspectives.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) presented strategies whereby educators could move away from a deficit mindset to that of recognizing and empowering difference. Theoretically, this educational framework would allow for an environment where "students can achieve academically...demonstrate cultural competence...and who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 474). Part of the ability to critique the existing social order requires educators to facilitate an environment

where dominant language is critically analyzed among intersections of unequal power relationships. The educator must construct assessment practices with students that are then measured against this ideal to be considered truly equitable.

Paris (2012) argued CRT should ask if a critical stance toward and critical action against unequal power relations is resulting from our research and practice. This inquiry has provided a turn in CRT toward methods that are culturally sustaining practices (CSP): that which conceptualizes teaching and learning that seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). Thus, it becomes important for educators, especially those of us who were educated under and benefitted from a white-dominant system, to reflect upon our assessment practices. As a white male with educational privilege, I needed to construct an equitable assessment process that would work to sustain multiple ways of knowing and would actively resist a mythical standard while also acknowledging my relative powerlessness to my colleagues, assessor, and administrators.

Over the course of my nearly twenty years of educational work, I have engaged in many difficult conversations with other educators. In the last several years of thinking and talking about linguistic justice, I am often reminded that this can be a necessarily confrontational process. Repeatedly, educators insisted that the Standard Language Myth was non-negotiable, and was necessary to prepare students for what those educators perceive to be the real world. Social scientists have long observed the effect a dominant group can maintain over the minds of the majority as being common sense, natural, and necessary even when those socially constructed ideals harm significant parts of the larger population and may even be absorbed by those most marginalized and disempowered (Foucault, 1980; Freire & Macedo, 1987). It should not be surprising then that social theory describing hegemonic behavior is empirically observed in our day-to-day assessment routines. I believe that those of us who are most likely to be biased toward mainstream cultural standards must confront this reality and work toward altering those habits.

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

I think it is important to acknowledge that this is not a neutral endeavor; it is necessarily a political project. In a society built upon anti-black racism and rooted in slavery, it is necessary to oppose white mainstream English with Black critical theory (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Baker-Bell (2020, p. 19) explained, “in relation to Black Language, BlackCrit helps to show how linguistic violence, persecution, dehumanization, and marginalization that Black Language-speakers experience in schools and in everyday life are informed by anti-Blackness.” The dialectic of resistance and the legacy of domination are theoretically necessary to construct a sufficient condition of equitable change.

What is more, resistance must be structured by the equitable educator as a purposeful activity. As educators, we can construct a space, with our students, that both values their ways of existing in the world and that resists dominance through persistent forms such as assessment practices that unfairly police students for being different. bell hooks (1994), explained that the power of black speech is not simply an act of resistance, but it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies - different ways of thinking and knowing crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview.

I have used two different ways of applying BlackCrit to assessment rubrics in my practice. The first involved confronting the language of the rubric itself; in what ways does the language we are using police or demean different ways of being in the world? The second involved deconstructing the process of assessment using the rubric as a mechanism for dialogue; in what ways can assessment practices be shared and what responsibilities do educators need to consider when providing critical feedback? Both methods must involve a preliminary stance toward self-reflection, but it also must include a secondary step of inviting students into a dialogue around that reflective process.

In the sections that follow, I examine how culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies might use rubrics to shift the focus away from the rubric as a panacea. This shift will require one to think outside the box when it comes to rubrics. I invite readers to follow me as I discuss the construction of the rubrics and to decenter the focus on the rubric itself. I think this is important because I am concerned about the competing contexts that structure

the construction of rubrics. I aim to bring attention to what these contexts tell us about the use of rubrics and how that discourse might unknowingly replicate conversations rooted in Standard English as a dominant source of knowledge production even when we believe we are attending to Blackcrit and CSP.

### **Rubrics As A Common Assessment Practice: My Journey**

I think it is helpful to provide a reflection of my journey as I approached assessment and rubrics critically. As part of two IRB-approved studies (2019-0743KCC and 2002-0052KCC), I have been examining how students engaged with concepts in my discipline, law and society, within a specialized educational program, criminal justice. I am also a member of a college-wide diversity, equity and inclusion team examining common educational practices at our institution. In particular, I am charged with examining cultural bias in the production of syllabi at our institution as well as teaching practices that stem from the syllabus including course materials, assignments, late work policies, and assessment.

I am not a linguist nor a composition instructor. However, I am interested in how legal language impacts the students I work with and how they make sense of it. I also want to encourage my students to use their own voice and to express their everyday understanding of legality. I have participated in a faculty interest group that has worked on linguistic justice for the past three years to better understand these differences.

I think is also important to acknowledge that we operate in political spaces and that the common language used in institutional, program and departmental assessment practices can influence how we think about our work and how we engage in the assessment process as institutional behavior. As illustrated in the introduction, assessment projects can influence not only how we think about our own practices but can also subtly influence how we approach the project itself, whether in the form of compliance, resistance, or avoidance. Systems influence our behaviors and routines have been found to alter our perceptions in most organizational contexts; thus, how we speak can change how we work (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Given the fact that the larger organizational structure is likely to promote the Standard Language Myth, a dedicated community of practitioners would



## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

need to effectively work to resist or influence the larger structure to promote equitable change at a larger scale.

With that in mind, I began with an examination of the purposes of assessment rubrics. I have placed the rubrics I constructed in the appendix to allow you to review them, assess them for yourself, and to compare those referenced throughout this essay. However, I want to intentionally de-center the rubrics as objects or representational artefacts. The rubric itself is not the goal of this article. I invite you to explore the process of constructing a rubric with students as CSP instead.

A typical definition of assessment generally focuses on a systematic process to determine educational goals. As educators we tend to think of assessment in two general ways. The first approach measures students as they engage with the course concepts, assignments, and activities. In this way we are trying to measure what the student is learning and where they may be struggling. The second builds from the first in that it seeks to generalize what is going on more broadly in the course: what is working, what is not, what changes might be made. I think it is also important to acknowledge that it can be difficult to develop a rigorous assessment process while also managing the course.

Some have argued that we too often use assessment to describe merely a set of tests to measure student learning regardless of the actual outcome (Dirksen, 2011). In other words, we tend to over-value the assessment tool and lose sight of the assessment goal. The use of formative assessments, those that use information to improve instructional methods and learning strategies, are seen as ways to move past the unexamined routine of content delivery and quick tests. There are many methods of conducting formative assessments: from casual observation to verbal communication and creative expression including drawings, poetry, and performance. How assessments are conducted tend to be contingent on the training, experience, and the prerogative of the individual instructor. These practices can vary widely within a single department, discipline, or even course sections taught by many different instructors.

Common approaches to course level or discipline and department-wide assessment tend to include a variety of tools, including the rubric. The term rubric is widely

used yet not often clearly defined (Cooper & Gargan, 2011). Rubrics can be thought of most commonly today as a set of rules, categories, or guidelines that are used to evaluate learning or performance.

The strength of the rubric can be defended by its usefulness for the instructor to think carefully and critically about specific outcomes, expectations, and the steps of an assignment or task; it can also provide a roadmap for students as a less mystical criteria for success. A rubric can also facilitate learning if students are encouraged to submit multiple drafts or revise work using feedback around the use of the rubric. Holistic rubrics are used for a single element broken down into levels of achievement. For example, a thesis statement at the low end might be unoriginal or poorly constructed whereas at the high end it is clear, complex, original and represents the exemplar. Analytic rubrics involve two dimensions where multiple criteria can be assessed along a developmental line. For example, critical thinking and grammar can be broken down into adequate, competent, good, and excellent. These rubrics invite students to imagine their learning along a trajectory of development.

### Looking at the Rubrics with a Critical Eye

Rubrics are not inherently inequitable. If one were to simply begin constructing an empty table in their word processor, and then pause, they would be struck by the nearly endless possibilities regarding what to place inside the boxes. Sometimes rubrics are provided to individual faculty members or departmental committees by administrative staff. From my experience, educators more often borrowed a rubric from another colleague, an educational conference, or a professional organization. We may do so without much critical reflection especially as it relates to the Standard Language Myth. Our department assessor provided a rubric that promoted the Standard Language Myth explicitly. The rubric included the following language: *Essay is well organized and argument is well supported and developed; Essay shows command of Academic English.*

Most of us in the assessment meeting initially rejected the adoption of this rubric for our own classes. We had several conversations in the assessment meetings about equity, so we were discouraged that multiple ways of knowing were completely absent from this approach. However, most educators insisted on keeping the

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

language of academic, standard, or college-level writing explicitly in the rubric. These arguments were framed as needing to have a standard but failed to consider who constructs such standards or whether the standard was ever clearly defined. The conversation deviated into a debate between subjectivity and objectivity and ended with a call for additional rubrics to compare. We each agreed to provide additional examples and try to work on a common rubric during the next meeting. I decided to look for external examples that might lessen the tension between entrenched faculty members.

One of those rubrics was the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics that articulate fundamental criteria for each learning outcome, with performance descriptors demonstrating progressively more sophisticated levels of attainment. The American Association of Colleges & Universities developed the rubrics for institutional-level use in evaluating and discussing student learning and have been used in a variety of disciplines (Rauschert et al., 2011). I had successfully used these rubrics in civic engagement, critical thinking, and global learning for institutional assessments in the past so I wondered how I might be able to integrate a VALUE rubric with my students that aligned with our institutional goal of measuring the ability to use evidence to support an argument.

The VALUE written communication rubric (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009) directs attention to usage and meaning. Theoretically, this approach should encourage faculty to engage with students in a process that guides each student into a more nuanced approach to creative and complex expression over the term of the course. Students might begin drafting statements that draws upon language that sometimes impedes meaning because of errors in usage. Through multiple drafts and feedback, the student should then be able to reduce conceptual mistakes and clarify intended meaning using language that the VALUE rubric describes as graceful and skillful. This approach certainly moves away from strictly using a rubric to catch student errors in the final product, but it fails to take advantage of the power of collaboration with students in the process. It also leaves the terms graceful and skillful open to interpretation.

At the next assessment meeting faculty were showing signs of frustration and disinterest. Many had never used a rubric before and very few had participated in assessment at the institutional level. Only two of us had offered rubrics and most were now resisting the entire assessment assignment. The entrenched faculty represented two sides. The majority expressed conviction that educators had a responsibility to ensure that students wrote proper English. The minority argued that students should be able to express their own opinions without critical feedback at all. The assessor insisted on using the rubric that stressed the Standard Language Myth.

I wondered whether these two poles might be mediated. It was clear that a transition away from faculty-directed rubric design focused on errors to a more collaborative approach with students needed to include equality of linguistic diversity. My colleagues needed to see that linguistic difference was a reality, not a choice, between home or street language, and the college classroom. They also needed to be able to recognize the unequal power relationships among faculty and student; students should be empowered to engage in a dialogue with faculty about the multiplicity of linguistic options. The code-meshing approach to composition is centered around such a commitment by allowing students to write in their native language variety (Young et al., 2018).

This approach is differentiated from so-called code-switching in two major ways. First, code-meshing does not retreat from teaching about the myth of standard English; instead, it recognizes the importance of both standard and undervalued varieties in contexts beyond the classroom (Young et al., 2018). Second, through contrastive analysis, in conjunction with semantics and rhetoric (Young et al., 2018) that involves a construction of language, including multiple sources, and considers multiple audiences in a way that blends or meshes rather than translates or switches. This re-framing helps to shift the attention to the political power of usage among unequal groups by de-centering the power of error in sentence construction. In this framing, what is considered proper or appropriate cannot be limited to that of the instructor or assessor only. Students must be consulted, and educators must learn a larger contextual network for language usage. This contextual network would necessarily need to incorporate multiple ways of sharing information through language.

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

Athon (2019) argued that collaborative assessment practices at the classroom level - rubrics, in particular - may help to avoid unfairly penalizing those students whose home dialects most diverge from standard academic English. Equitable uses of rubrics focus on the process of writing and collaborating with students from diverse backgrounds. In addition, the co-construction of rubrics that center on critical questions about the relations between language, race and power can help facilitate dialogue within the institution that resists the Standard Language Myth. I tried to mediate the two poles by inviting students to critically engage with the rubric. This process also required that I actively listen and respond with a rubric that better aligned with their own definitions of success.

### **Breaking the Rubric as a Static, Objective, or Panacea**

Rubrics, like any other socially constructed tool, are not inherently inequitable but the language used in the rubric might be inequitable. A common inequitable practice among educators using a rubric is the use of prescriptive rules including grammar or standard academic English (de Cuba and Slocum, 2020). In many instances the instructor explicitly referred to a standard in the rubric itself. Sometimes the phrasing states college-level, academic, mainstream, correct, or appropriate language or usage. Other times the standard is presented in negative form meaning that the educator lowered grades or scores that they attributed as errors without the student being aware. Thus, the choice of language in the rubric itself, while conscious or not, represents a deficit approach—what students lack in comparison to an imagined norm—instead of capturing different ways of knowing.

I am not suggesting that rubrics should not be instructive or provide critical feedback. I am suggesting that rubrics are not a panacea. Simply articulating to students that they may speak in their own voice or use African American English, for example, does not itself constitute a challenge to hegemonic knowledge production.

For example, Hankerson (2022) used a rubric from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Writing Assessment to measure whether writing instruction for African American Language speaking

students would be more productive if it used critical language assessment as a lens for problematizing and challenging White, monolingual, middle-class language norms permeating U.S. writing curricula. Hankerson found evidence that it did; however, the rubric was used by three college writing instructors to analyze students' writing ability before and after the instruction. The rubric used a rating score of competent as the highest rating and limited as the lowest. This is no doubt a useful tool for instructors within the discipline, but no evidence was given that suggested that the power of assessment was shared or co-constructed with students. In one student exit interview from the article there is evidence of a lack of clarity, "I was not sure what it was going to be about but it seemed interesting." While I think the study provided a valuable approach to instruction for African American Language speaking students, I do not believe it is evidence of an assessment model that dismantles patterns and forms of systemic inequities.

This was not self-evident in my own journey either. As I searched for rubrics that were more inclusive and responsive to the students, I mostly found a tendency to see the rubric as a neutral or objective tool. I realized that it would become necessary to break the mold of what a rubric meant to share this power with students. From my review of the literature and from practical experience, rubrics seem to be constructed either in isolation or through a departmental or disciplinarian professional development exercise. While these are valuable, there is room for improvement. It would be better if rubrics were co-constructed with students and with other educators to respond to learning in practice.

I opted for a visual aid (Rubric 1.1 provided in the Appendix) that served as a starting point in the collaborative process. I tried to respond to the conceptual challenges students were evidencing in the first drafts of a low-stakes writing assignment. I had to become comfortable with the idea of breaking the rubric and letting a more fluid, interactive process emerge. This approach deviated from usage error but also did not explicitly focus on either standard language ideology or code-meshing. Instead, I wanted a visual that would help guide students through the process of communicating their ideas about the course threshold concepts.

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

At the first meeting, students were eager to discuss how to move from the first stage to the second. I had not anticipated this level of engagement. I thought that students would focus on the final stage. I assumed they would want to know how to get an A and move on. Instead, they were curious about how they might develop over the rest of the semester and were curious as to whether this would make them better students. For example, TM<sup>1</sup> shared that “this way of grading doesn’t punish me for being a non-native speaker.”

Dialogue around the rubric was organized over email, one-on-one interactions with students, and small group writing workshops over Zoom to address their collective questions. I also included a Google form at the end of the process to record their remaining questions and reflections about the process. The original assignment required students to write about an issue they were most concerned about, explain partisan positions on the issue, and to predict which solution was most likely. When we reached the second stage of development, where we talked about what an over-generalization was, students disclosed how much they disliked the assignment. I think that was a critical and transformative moment for me as I scrambled to respond to this collective resistance.

Most students expressed being uncomfortable with the form of the writing assignment: it seemed too informal as a hypothetical letter to their future self. I had intended that this assignment would be low-stakes and familiar to them as if in the form of a diary entry. I had hoped that this approach would deepen self-awareness. However, students did not make these connections overall. They argued this is not how they typically write anymore and instead they use memes and other forms of expression common to social media. Students shared over email that they thought because the assignment was in letter format that they did not need to write it like a typical college paper. The students suggested we transition from the conceptual rubric to something more formal. I would not have been able to respond to students in this way if I had simply adopted the departmental rubric.

I reached out to a colleague who teaches linguistics at another community college whom I had met through a professional development working group on linguistic justice. She offered a rubric that seemed to address our

desire to incorporate student preference for language variety and a visual guide for writing improvement through drafting. This rubric included language that indicated grammar, vocabulary and language choice were appropriate to the audience and occasion and that errors do not interfere with comprehension.

I shared this rubric with students, and they struggled to read it at first. They were not sure how the columns and rows related. One student commented favorably about the references to use evidence in a logical way. “This is like my speech class,” the student said and compared their speech to the writing assignment. The other students started to make comparisons to high school and other classes they were taking. We talked about how to read a rubric and the students suggested I make a rubric that was more closely related to the work in our class.

I decided on an amended rubric approach constructed with students (Rubric 1.2 provided in the Appendix). I shared a draft of the amended rubric with students several weeks before their final writing assignments were due. This rubric built upon the previous sessions with students to focus on research-based solutions to political problems. We discussed grammar and usage challenges. Many students were English language learners and were very worried that they would be graded harshly even though they felt they understood the concepts. Other students expressed enthusiasm that this class would be focused on how well they researched instead of whether they were a perfect writer. Together, we constructed this rubric that alleviated their fears and embraced their communication goals. We spent nearly an hour over two meetings to negotiate the final language of this rubric.

### **Toward an Equitable Framework for Rubric Co-Construction**

In this article, I have tried to demonstrate how dialogue with students can be effective in constructing a process whereby language diversity is respected and that de-centers the final writing product as the tantamount object for assessment. Throughout my assessment rubric journey, I wanted to decenter the Standard Language Myth, co-construct a process with students that might challenge hegemonic knowledge production, and make space for multiethnic ways of being. I also wanted to be able to take a critical stance as a practitioner and

<sup>1</sup> Names of students have been changed to protect their identities.



## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

to theorize how critical action might be pragmatically implemented within my own institution while acknowledging the levels of unequal power relations. In this section, I analyze how this process affected the students and to what extent that helped me with my goals.

One student, BB, shared this in the final exam reflection:

“I will always remember all of the help and how patient all of you guys were for my first semester of college in which I was nervous for. I learned a lot from this class because I’m not really into politics but this class made me do very deep research and it helped me understand a lot about politics.”

BB and other students expressed relief that they got to focus on core concepts of the course while learning how to develop their writing skills at the same time. Another student, ZM, confirmed the value of an experiential process of learning: “I will remember conversating with some of the professors which helped me and the lessons I learned some were quite interesting.” These two students, in a stage of development, were able to identify the process of college level expectations, learn new concepts and produce facts, and express themselves in familiar ways. Many of them shared that this kind of meta-cognitive experience was new for them.

I am aware that there are some educators who might be uncomfortable with the language usage in the quotations above. My goal throughout this project has been to mediate between the strict adherents to the Standard Language Myth and those that argue for dismantling it altogether. My intention is to provide a path away from policing students, particular those students who come from experiences that do not neatly conform to white, mainstream cultural ideas. I believe this will be necessarily messy and imperfect.

Composition scholar Asao B. Inoue (2017) argued that one key component of antiracist pedagogy is considering the ways in which traditional assessment practices promote racist ideologies because they are based in monocultural and monolingual norms. Inoue urges us to reconsider what counts as error in writing

assessment so that we might make space for students’ diverse linguistic abilities, thereby embracing more antiracist and culturally aware perspectives. Without this approach students like ZM and BB are likely to perceive an educational environment as one where they don’t belong.

Relatedly, Linguist Suresh Canagarajah (2003) called for composition classes to abandon the notion of a single, standard language in favor of helping students develop competency in various codes and discourses. Like Inoue, Canagarajah advocated for expanded notions of what counts as valid and valuable language within the classroom, a call that supports both antiracist pedagogy and CSP. Additionally, scholars involved in antiracist work such as Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Neil Simpkins and Beth Godbee (2016) urged us to value personal, first-hand narratives by people of color as legitimate sources of knowledge, a move that aligns with CSP’s emphasis on students’ lived experiences. This means that the writing students do in college are likely to first represent their own lived experience. This should be captured in the learning process and in assessment strategies.

CSP provide flexible tools to address both content and practice toward more equitable outcomes. However, assessment efforts commonly transcend the single classroom and thus can be stubbornly anti-equity at the institutional level. Educators who collaborate in a learning community find themselves at a crossroads resulting in a paradox. At the course level, assessments can be constructed for linguistic justice. At the program or institutional level, assessments might contradict or devalue this effort. Learning communities need to enable a way out of this contradiction.

In this case, I was able to share my assessment journey with two other educators in a learning community. Learning communities involve two or more educators who share a cohort of students and intentionally design assignments and activities for those students. Learning communities have been found to be a high-impact practice. High-impact practices (HIPs) are those that value active, engaged, and collaborative forms of learning for students where students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks and

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

where they repeatedly interact with each other, faculty, and staff about substantive measures, diversifying their experiences with feedback from multiple sources across time and space (Kuh, 2008). Studies have shown more equitable outcomes among Hispanic and black students in greater gains in first-year GPAs, retention, and well-being (Brownell & Swaner, 2010). While there is evidence that HIPS are effective, they are not automatic. Learning communities must be carefully structured to provide engagement and support for students of color with a mindset dedicated to equitable practice.

Learning communities also have the potential to confront the domination of standard English ideology but these must intentionally promote difference and empower individual voices beyond the individual classroom experience. Without intentionality, marginalized students will end up being miseducated about language if they aren't taught that all human languages and language varieties have inherent grammatical patterns and are systematic and rule-governed, (Smitherman, 2017).

The learning community provided the space for three educators from different disciplines and with different learning outcomes to share assessment practices. It was helpful that each of us were familiar with CSP. However, there was still a gap in our disciplinary knowledge that affected what concepts we wanted to focus on. Threshold concepts provide a pathway that places greater emphasis on the demonstration of learning core concepts than that of grammatical or linguistic differences more commonly found in traditional verbal and oral communication assessment rubrics. Theoretically, core concepts can be deconstructed to allow for multiple ways of being and speaking to demonstrate the requisite knowledge. The focus on threshold hold concepts therefore can be a kind of back door to promoting linguistic justice. Assessment rubrics can be designed to focus on the development of core concepts and encourage students to use their own voice.

Within the context of the individual course, Meyer and Land's (2003) notion of the threshold concept is defined as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something that represents a transformed way of understanding,

or interpreting or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. There are many candidates for threshold knowledge in particular disciplines. For example, a sociology class can focus on the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). Or an economics class can focus on opportunity costs (Stone, 2015). This approach might be helpful to educators who are nervous about deviating from certain core elements of their syllabus or discipline. In CSP, teachers would use aspects of students' cultures in an asset-based approach as opposed to deficit-based to make the course material relevant to them, and increase their skill acquisition, engagement, and learning outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Where the learning community provided space, threshold concepts provided content. The rubrics were generated to help students better understand what we hoped they would do in our classrooms - not solely to grade a final written product. This statement must be accompanied by some nuance. Inevitably, students must turn in a final assignment and the rubric will no doubt play some rule in the grading process. However, as we were constructing the rubrics and assignments, we began to identify blind spots in our practices that became much more visible when we engaged in dialogue with students. These blind spots are much more indicative of student learning and should be a central focus of departmental and institutional assessment projects. These would have remained hidden if I adopted the departmental rubric.

My own views of language ideology and grading were also challenged throughout this process. I began with a critical analysis of the language used in the rubrics but began to shift to a broader view of how the rubrics might be used. As I struggled with the constraints of the Standard Language Myth in my department and college-wide assessment, I began to feel liberated in the active co-construction of more equitable assessment tools with my colleagues and students. Rubrics are more useful as fluid, adaptive teaching tools and as equitable guides. Fluidity and adaptiveness are also elements of CSP.

Most students expressed relief and interest in the rubric. I believe the rubric itself functioned as a landmark for many students who were unsure of what college writing really involved. The rubric construction process was also

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

transparent, and they could see that their three educators were collaborating to provide the best possible experience with them. This was a noticeably absent condition of the larger assessment drive by the college. Student voices were simply not included at all.

I think it is important to address a stubborn reality. CRT and HIPS provide much needed environmental change for immigrants and students of color, but these changes are often new and uncomfortable for white students. Resistance to conceptual change was greatest for student FS and he evidenced discomfort moving away from the Standard Language Myth model of grading early in the semester. After a workshop where we discussed the differences from their high school experiences and the expectations they were learning about at college, FS shared,

“I feel like I’m missing out on information. Like there are gaps where certain information connects. I would rather be graded on what I already know and can make right answers on a test.”

This approach also came up in a small group workshop between FS and ZN, both learners who have benefited from the Standard Language Myth and other forms of white privilege. In the first draft, ZN struggled with following the instructions, did not apply course content, and interpreted evidence as something that would support his qualitative opinion—meaning he could not imagine a scenario in which his opinion needed to be qualified—as simply a second, confirmation. ZN and FS reinforced each other in discussion that they should only need to find something from social media that “backs them up,” and that more critical or reflective thought was unnecessary. This attitude visibly upset other students because their non-white working-class points of view were not being treated seriously or equitably.

The opinion confirmation-seeking among majority populations is also consistent with political science findings about social media information networks (Leggett & King-Reilly, 2020). For ZN to develop the kind of writing and evidence-based learning process prescribed by the institution, ZN would need to engage with a critical process of analyzing information and the patterns of relational power as well as the mechanisms that collect, organize, and distribute information. Even though ZN and FS were uncomfortable with a different process of grading, they ultimately benefitted from a rubric

that focused on multiple ways of expressing knowledge.

Over time our collective responsive approach had a noticeable effect on ZN as he began to be confronted by alternative ways of knowing and as more diverse students began to feel more comfortable sharing their opinions. FS, however, struggled with why he should have to engage with a more critical process but admitted he was more open-minded than before. I believe the focus on diversity and theories of language and power were necessary as a kind of meta-threshold concept before FS could engage with the course material. ZN and FS were the only students who shared that they did not need to work while attending college and did not know anyone affected by the pandemic. ZN however began to see the need for alternative points of view when he interviewed his mother, a retired schoolteacher, for an assignment. In conclusion, I believe language diversity was concrete for most students and became more concrete for ZN but remained a mere abstraction for FS.

I also think it is important to refine our analysis of equitable pedagogies that focus on common practices. Paris (2012) argued that educators must re-articulate the goals of culturally responsive practices. These practices must create spaces that considers each learner as a valuable member of the whole. They must evoke cultural sustaining pedagogies that support the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities and that provide access to dominant cultural competence (Paris, 2012). No matter the cultural background, it is impossible to recognize and implement culturally sustaining pedagogies without engaged dialogue with the people who experience and practice culture in their own lives. Engaged dialogue is important not only with students but with our peers as well. In this sense, moving toward equity in higher education, would require both a critical examination of the inequity within structural - historical relations and a new ability to co-construct an equitable learning environment with students across differences.

### Conclusion

While one focus for equity has been on learning materials this cannot be the only effort. Certainly, it is important. For example, Brandle (2018) found that of the political science open educational resource (OER) materials she reviewed, none of them directly focused on equitable or culturally responsive pedagogies directly. OER had been held out as an equitable intervention

## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

largely because of the reduced cost and supposed increase in access. As the pandemic has made more visible, access and cost are not fully eliminated through the introduction of OER. Standard language ideology is also dominant in our most common educational materials (de Cuba & Slocum, 2020). Materials must be considered within the larger context of assessment however to result in a practical shift of practices. Our assessment strategies must be radial; they must include student's lived experiences and varied ways of expression throughout the entire educational process.

It is not enough to document inequity in our materials, assessment practices, and pedagogies in our own disciplines. We must co-construct new approaches responsively with students across differences. Learning communities provide a cohesive structure for this kind of transformation. Language is one of the most entrenched forms of supremacy and institutional racism. It is often hard to uncover as it operates within routines deep in the makeup of our institutions and disciplines. Surely, beginning with dialogue about concepts borne of supremacist institutionalism is a pragmatic and effective framework for material change. One of the most common concepts of domination is the Standard Language Myth and is evident in our shared assessment practices.

The combination of CSP, learning communities as HIPs, and threshold concepts provide an equitable framework for analyzing assessment rubrics. This analysis is rooted in the desire to transition away from the Standard Language Myth. I argue this is where we should boldly focus our attention and construct practical strategies that can be replicated and scaled. Part of the ability to critique the existing social order requires educators to facilitate an environment where dominant language is critically analyzed among intersections of unequal power relationships. The educator must construct assessment practices with students that are then measured against this ideal to be considered truly equitable.

My journey was not a straight line. To decenter hegemonic knowledge production, I needed to break the rubric and re-construct it with students. I had to engage with other educators to construct assessments that focused on the process of equity instead of a final product. I also had to acknowledge the limitations of a cultural shift. So long as the unequal social relations persisted in our differentiated roles across the college, equitable assessment remains a political project. The Standard Language Myth is deeply rooted. Changing language in rubrics cannot be a final step. We must boldly discuss how assessment can be liberated from policing students and how we can co-construct knowledge with students.



## Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

### Appendix

Rubric 1.1 Preliminary rubric presented to students as thought bubbles in a video and through Zoom meetings.

Needs Revision	Working it Out	Getting There	You Got it
Did not follow instruction. Could not identify a social problem. Resisted data collection. Took a Counter-Productive Approach.	Included too many problems. Tended to over-generalize. Paper was disorganized. Provided a platitude for a solution.	Blamed individual motives. Provided anecdotes as examples. Tended toward monologue or a speech. Unaware of social structures.	Stated a problem clearly. Referenced reliable data. Organized the paper logically. Included a logical conclusion and addressed counter-factual arguments.

Rubric 1.2. Final grading assessment tool co-constructed with students.

D	C	B	A
Did not frame the issue in the format required.	Stated too many unrelated social problems of was too broad in definition.	Stated the social problem with a personal opinion about motives of other actors.	Clearly stated the social problem within the correct political context.
Did not provide evidence.	Overgeneralized based on opinions without research.	Generalized based on personal experience and cited to unreliable sources.	Provided related evidence and indicated reliable sources.
Did not organize the writing.	Provided too many reasons in a disorganized manner or did not match reasons with solutions.	Used evidence to support their opinion only and did not organize evidence to include alternative points of view.	Clearly organized the evidence logically.
Did not present any solutions or saw the problem as impossible to change.	Presented a solution that was not based in the real world or did not match the social problem presented.	Drew a conclusion that over-simplified the political process or shifted the responsibility to one person or social group.	Drew a logical conclusion with insight, included practical solutions, and provided evidence the solution might work.

### References

Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

## References

- American Association of Colleges & Universities. VALUE Rubrics. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics/value-rubrics-written-communication>.
- American Association of Colleges & Universities (2009). Written Communication VALUE rubric. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics/value-rubrics-inquiry-and-analysis>.
- Athon, A. (2019). Designing rubrics to foster students' diverse language backgrounds. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 38(1), 78-104.
- Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic Justice: black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Brandle, S. (2018). Opening up to OERs: Electronic original sourcebook versus traditional textbook in the Introduction to American Government course, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 14(4), 535-554.
- Brownell, J.E., and Swaner, L.E., (2010) *Five high impact practices: Research on learning outcomes, completion, and quality*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Canagarajah, S. (2003). Practicing multiliteracies. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. 12:151-179.
- Cooper, B.S., & Gargan, A. (2011). Rubrics in education: Old term, new meanings. *Educational Horizons*, 89(4), 6-8.
- de Cuba, C., & and Slocum, P. (2020). Standard language ideology is alive and well in public speaking textbooks. *Proceedings of Linguistic Society of America* 5(1). 369-383.
- Diab, R., Goodbee, B., Ferrell, T., & Simpkins, N. (2016). Making commitments to racial justice actionable. In: Condon, F., & Young, V.A. (Eds.). *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing and Communication*. University Press of Colorado.
- Dirksen, D. J. (2011). Hitting the reset button: Using formative assessment to guide instruction. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(7), 26-31.
- Dumas, M. & Ross, K.M. (2016). Be real Black for me: Imagining blackcrit in education. *Urban education*, 51(4), 415-442.
- Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. (1998). *The common place of law: Stories from everyday life*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980). Truth and power. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (pp. 109-133). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Hankerson, S. (2022). Why can't writing courses be taught like this for real? Leveraging critical language awareness to promote African American Language speakers' writing skills. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. 58, 100919.
- hooks, bell (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge.
- Inoue, A. (2017). *Antiracist writing assessment ecologies: Teaching and assessing writing for a socially just future*. Parlor Press.
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995a). Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491.

Equity, Language Ideology and Culture *continued*

- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(3), 159-165.
- Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States*. Routledge: New York.
- Leggett J. (2016) Supporting critical civic learning with interactive technology. In: Schnee E., Better A., Clark Cummings M. (Eds). *Civic Engagement Pedagogy in the Community College: Theory and Practice*. *Education, Equity, Economy*, vol 3. Springer.
- Leggett, J., Wen, J., and Chatman, A. (2018). Emancipatory learning, open educational resources, open education, and digital critical participatory action research. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Innovative Pedagogy*, 1, Article 4.
- Leggett, J. M., & King-Reilly, R. (2020). In the age of fake news: Shifting citizenry, shifting thresholds. *Currents in Teaching and Learning*, 12(1), 6-18.
- Meyer, J., & Land, R. (2003). *Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practicing within the disciplines* (pp. 412-424). Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Mills, C.W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press: London.
- Ostrom, E. (1986). An agenda for the study of institutions. *Public Choice*, 48(1), 3-25.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41, 93-97.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84, 85-100.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.
- Rauschert, E. S. J., Dauer, J., Momsen, J. L., & Sutton-Grier, A. (2011). Primary literature across the undergraduate curriculum: teaching science process skills and content. *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America*, 92(4), 396-405.
- Reaser, J., Adger, C.T., Wolfram, W., and Christian, D. (2017). *Dialects at school: Educating linguistically diverse students*. New York: Routledge.
- Smitherman, G. (2017). Raciolinguistics, "mis-education," and language arts teaching in the 21st century. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 32(2), 4-12.
- Stone, D. F. (2015). Clarifying (opportunity) costs. *The American Economist*, 60(1), 20-25.
- Young, V.A., Barret, R., Young-Rivera, Y., & Lovejoy, K.M. (2018). *Other people's English: code-meshing, code-switching, and African-American literacy*. Parlor Press.