Finding Words for It: Unpacking the Language of Engagement in Higher Education

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Session Agenda

I. Opening poem

II. Study purpose and research question

III. Research methods

IV. Key findings

V. Implications for practice and research

VI. Closing questions

Words for It

I wish I could take language
And fold it like cool, moist rags.
I would lay words on your forehead.
I would wrap words on your wrists.
"There, there," my words would say—
Or something better.
I would murmur,
"Hush" and "Shh, shhh, it's all right."

I would ask them to hold you all night.
I wish I could take language
And daub and soothe and cool
Where fever blisters and burns,
Where fever turns yourself against you.
I wish I could take language
And heal the words that were the wounds
You have no names for.

by Julia Cameron

What's language got to do with it?

- Growing disconnect between diversity and inclusion efforts and community engagement initiatives on college campuses (Hurtado, 2007), along with "underside" of community engagement (e.g., Jones, Gilbride-Brown, & Gasiorski, 2005)

- Language is socially constructed and shaped by power relations within social institutions like colleges and universities (Fairclough, 2015)

- Language actively constructs representations of individuals, groups, organizations, and relationships (Wetherell, 2001)

- A critical examination of representations can uncover discursive strategies for maintaining inequities (van Dijk, 1993)

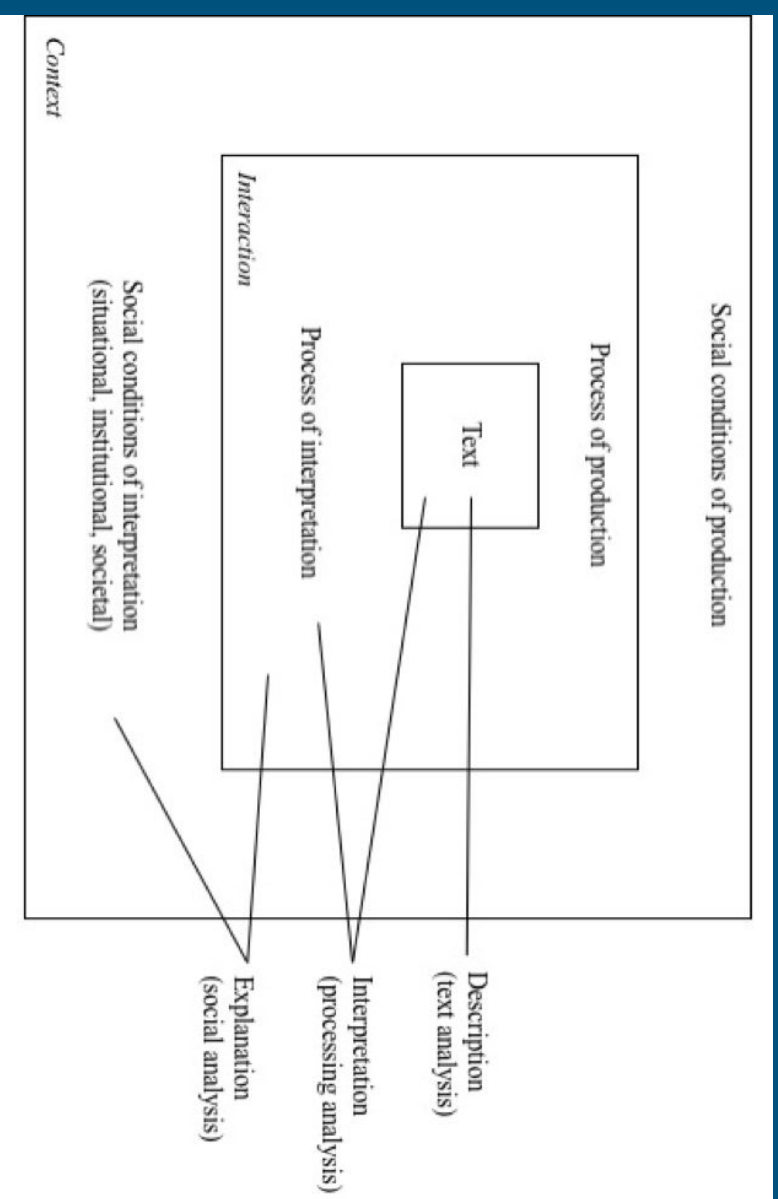- Scant research exists on language use in community engagement

Study Overview

The purpose of the study was to describe how colleges and universities use language to represent diversity and inclusion in community engagement.

Primary RQ: In what ways do colleges and universities use language to represent diversity and inclusion in community engagement?

Research Design

- Qualitative methodology

- Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2015) using a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2009)

- Critical research paradigm (Hurtado, 2015; Rossman & Rallis, 2003)

Context

Social conditions of production

Interaction

Process of production

Text

Process of interpretation

Social conditions of interpretation
(situational, institutional, societal)

Description
(text analysis)

Interpretation
(processing analysis)

Explanation
(social analysis)

Fairclough, 2013

University Cases

City Heights University	Mountain View University	Small Town University
Private, master's granting university	Public, doctoral granting university	Small, public liberal arts university
5,000+ students	12,000+ students	Fewer than 2,000 students
Growing midsize city in the Midwest	Small city in the west	Remote town in the Midwest

Research Sub-Questions	Data Sources
How does language in application responses for the Community Engagement Classification represent diversity and inclusion?	• First-time documentation framework (16 pages) • Written application responses for the 2015 classification process (3 documents, 164 pages) • Focus on diversity and inclusion question ("Is community engagement connected with diversity and inclusion work (for students and faculty) on your campus?")
How does language in application responses for the Community Engagement Classification represent diversity and inclusion?	Transcribed audio recording from individual interviews (6 interviews, 79 pages)
How does language on community engagement office web pages represent diversity and inclusion?	Web page screenshots (69 pages from 36 hyperlinks)

Descriptive Findings

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Description of texts for each university case study

Review of text properties across cases

Not about people or places - language use

Linguistic Feature	Explanation
Lexicalization	The selection/choice of wordings
Overlexicalization	Different words construct the same idea differently
Relexicalisation	Many words for the same phenomenon
	Renaming
Lexical cohesion	Created by synonymy, antonymy, repetition, and collection
Euphemism	Hides negative actions or implications
Transitivity	Processes in verbs: are they verbs of? - *Doing*: action and material processes - *Being or having*: relational processes - *Thinking/feeling/perceiving*: mental processes - *Saying*: verbal processes - *Physiological*: behavioral processes - *Existential*: experiential processes
Voice	Active and passive voice constructs Participants as doers or as done-to's Passive voice allows for the deletion of the agent
Nominalization	A process is turned into a thing or an event without participants or tenses or modality Central mechanism for reification
Quoted speech	Who is quoted in direct or indirect speech?
Direct speech	Who is quote first/last/most?
Indirect speech	Who is not quoted? What reporting verb was chosen? What is the effect of "so-called" or scare quotes?

Sample Descriptive Findings

- Intertextuality with university documents
- University as "do-er" of action and community as recipient of action
- Diversity or diverse as replacements for named social identities
- Diversity as something/someone to be managed or counted
- Supplemental nature of diversity and inclusion
- Presuppositions in "the" community
- "Us/them" distinctions in pronoun use
- Diverse as a descriptor of groups or place
- Community as a seamless unit

Interpretative Findings

Representations of Diversity	Representations of Inclusion
• Diversity as a seamless "other" • Diversity as a proxy • Diversity as a commodity	• Inclusion as correction • Inclusion as honoring • Inclusion as a skillset

Diversity as a Seamless "Other"

- Labels of groups as diverse (diverse community, diverse population, diverse students)

- Presumes familiarity with where diversity resides and reference group of interest (Latino community)

- Seamless unit of non-white bodies (pronoun "them") as a recurring other in university community engagement (otherness outside the institution or "other" within institution)

- Make invisible inequalities, discount divisions, and erase power differentials for the sake of seamlessness

- Signaling who and what is diverse, but also who and what is not

Inclusion as Honoring

- Universities or university stakeholders being honored by a relationship with a "diverse" entity (NAACP) or as conveying honor upon one (Dr. King)
- "Food and fun" nature of an empowerment script that can simultaneously demonstrate connection yet foster distance
- Diverse bodies welcomed into spaces as temporary residents or guests with unwritten conditions for admission
- Terms or conditions can include a willingness to be repaired, celebrated, or empowered for the sake of university promotion or student learning

Explanatory Findings

Discourse Types	Ideologies
Managerial Promotional Specialist Oppositional	Neoliberalism White supremacy

Study Implications

For practice:

- Opportunities for language-based interventions to promote critical reflection-in-action
- Teaching and practicing critical language skills (i.e., naming)
- Fostering environmental conditions for *unlearning* language use and disrupting shame

For research:

- Research partnership with the Carnegie Foundation
- Additional sources of language from community engagement practice
- Socialization processes of language use in community engagement actor narratives

Wonderings (and wanderings)

- How can we tell stories of justice, solidarity, and shared futures through our language use?

- What does it look like and feel like to lean into the emotional discomfort of examining language-in-use?

- How can we engage tensions in the language of diversity and inclusion to advance new ways of speaking to and about one another?

- How can language use facilitate agency and healing?

- What do we want the vocabulary of engagement to communicate during this moment, and to whom?

"To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection."

Paulo Freire
Pedagogy of the Oppressed