

## Examining Language in Higher Education Courses: Creating Opportunities for Critical Reflection

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**Abstract.** Words and labels used about a person inevitably have an impact, whether intended or unintended. This article discusses the need for intentional and overt, critical reflection and discussion in higher education regarding the language faculty and students use. The authors provide language examples commonly used in courses that could have varied meanings. Instructional strategies which support reflective conversations surrounding language in higher education courses are provided.

**Keywords:** Instructional Practices, Reflective Teaching, Higher Education

Given ever-increasing diversity found on college campuses the task for instructors to cultivate an inclusive climate becomes essential where diversity (i.e., the range of human differences) is celebrated and respected. All students, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, identity, age, and ability should be welcomed and valued in the higher education learning environment. Numerous discipline-specific professional organizations echo this sentiment of respect and inclusiveness (American Psychological Association, 2016; American Sociological Association, 2018; Council for Exceptional Children, 2015; National Association for the Education of Young Children; 2011).

In an effort to create an inclusive learning environment where all students are welcomed and valued (Moriña, 2017), faculty and instructors should examine the words, phrases, gestures, and cues used within classrooms and course work as they often send messages, both intended and unintended, which inevitably leave impressions on a diverse set of students. One may argue the language used within higher education learning environments has lasting social, educational, and policy implications.

What an instructor says and how students internalize language transcends the higher education classroom context. Observational learning occurs every day with people of all ages (Bandura, 1977; Gaskins & Paradise, 2010). Therefore, the language and strategies instructors model in the college classroom can generalize into students' professional practices. Therefore, careful reflection and examination of the language used within higher education learning environments demands attention. It is essential for instructors to foster and cultivate critical reflection in students by providing strategies and opportunities to approach language in a sensitive manner. The purpose of this article is to review specific language which, when used within higher education classrooms, intentionally or inadvertently relays messages to students. In addition, this article examines the role of deliberate and overt reflective practice surrounding language usage both by instructors and

students and the use of transformative learning in the higher education context. Finally, strategies to encourage language reflection are offered. It is important to note, that the discipline of the authors is teacher preparation and many of the examples within this article focus on this area. However, the strategies provided are applicable to all disciplines. Regardless of the content area being taught, critical reflection and discussion of language usage is essential as students may begin to use the same language in the work force without recognizing the unintentional message it sends.

### **Reflection as a Learning and Teaching Skill**

Prominent educational philosopher and reformer John Dewey (1916) argued that we do not learn from experience; rather, we learn from reflecting on experience. The act of reflection may be seen as the bridge between experience and learning. Schon (1983) examines reflection within professional practice where individuals understand why they do certain things because they think about what it is they are doing. This adds an element of intentionality and consciousness into experience and learning. This intentionality and consciousness in learning brought about by reflection is especially important in teacher preparation where students are learning how to teach through being taught. The strategies, techniques, and language within the learning context take on a new element of importance, given that the way in which students learn about how to teach may impact their pedagogical decisions when they themselves are teachers (Berry, 2007). The same can be said in other disciplines such as medicine, nursing, business, social work and so forth. While the content is imperative, other elements of the learning environment will inevitably impact the type of professional the student becomes.

Zeichner and Liu (2010) take a look at the "reflection movement" wherein the concept of reflection is seen as mandatory but is often abstract, undefined, or misunderstood (p. 69). This may equate to the belief that reflection is good but what exactly is meant by reflective teaching and learning may be unclear. Within the literature, researchers and philosophers alike have attempted to define what reflection may look like. For example, Freire (1968) argues against the notion of "banking education" with instructors viewed as holding all knowledge and students as passive recipients with the sole job of consuming what is provided by their instructors (p. 58). Instead, Freire calls for reciprocal action in learning; reflective dialogue where learning is shaped by interactions with others and their ideas, perspectives, etc. Critical reflection is at the heart of this learning where students and instructors discuss, reflect, discuss some more, and so on. Both instructor and student have a pivotal role in the reflection and learning that take place within the classroom context.

Larrivee (2000) speaks of critical reflection and the link to transforming teaching practices arguing that critical reflection involves both critical inquiry and self-reflection. Educators must not simply learn and implement instructional strategies in isolation from reflecting upon these instructional strategies and how they mesh with or challenge their personal beliefs, experiences, and biases. Larrivee posits that educators make overt connections for themselves and their students between

the instructional strategies they employ and their own beliefs regarding how teaching and learning occur. Larrivee offers several strategies for this discovery process including setting time aside for isolated personal reflection and questioning the status quo. Smith (2011) reviews the role of critical reflection in higher education and the conditions for such reflection to be successful. The author maintains "teaching critical reflection in [higher education] requires creating conditions for intellectual challenge – which is a challenge" (p. 14), but goes further to argue that teaching critical reflection is a sound step in supporting higher education students to become professionals who can navigate complex ethical issues.

Understanding and acknowledging implicit bias is key in the type of critical reflection discussed above. Social psychologists Greenwald and Banaji (1995) are credited with coining the term implicit bias and argue it is possible to unconsciously hold attitudes and stereotypes toward an individual or group which impact how we behave toward or refer to others. Because these attitudes and stereotypes are often automatic and not readily accessible, self-awareness and even critical reflection may not be enough to fully understand the messages instructors pass along in their language and behaviors in the higher education learning context. Staats (2015) reviewed research on mitigating the effects of implicit bias in education. Suggestions include taking the free online Implicit Association Test (IAT) designed by Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz (1998) and "exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars...[including] male nurses [and] female scientists" (Staats, n.d., paragraph 31). Participating in actions such as taking the IAT test and then engaging in critical reflection can support instructors and students in identifying and challenging their implicit bias.

One would hope that purposeful critical reflection within higher education coursework along with becoming aware of and challenging implicit bias might lead to a shift in thinking and learning. However, instructors need to take into consideration that their students are adults and have already formed frames of reference that define their world. In other words, they have developed assumptions, values, and feelings through which they understand their experiences (Mezirow, 2012). Adults often reject ideas that do not fit into their already developed frames of reference (Mezirow, 1994). This emphasizes the need to understand our experiences as well as implicit biases so we can strive toward viewpoints that are more inclusive and functional (Mezirow, 2012). Creating conditions in which transformative learning can occur is important, and often necessary, in order for adults to meaningfully engage with colleagues and other professionals (King, 2004).

### **Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning has been defined as "the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (Mezirow, 1994, p. 222-223). When one's beliefs are no longer functional, one reflects on the unexamined assumptions of one's beliefs (Mezirow, 1994). Critical reflection occurs when one experiences a disorienting dilemma. For

example, a student may volunteer in an unfamiliar community and experience a disorienting dilemma related to culture and family structures of community members that did not fit into their frame of reference. When critical reflection occurs, one examines the origin, nature, and consequences of the assumption to determine if the long-held belief is still functional (Mezirow, 1994; Mezirow, 2012).

Research indicates higher education instructors can create conditions in which transformative learning occurs. For example, Bell and colleagues examined the experiences of 150 college students from the United States who participated in an interdisciplinary, experiential study abroad experience (Bell et al., 2016). Throughout the program students were provided opportunities that were outside of their "comfort zones" (e.g., new country, new cultural context, new food) and encouraged to change the way they understand their worldview and themselves. Analysis of student written reflection indicated participants experienced various disorienting dilemmas (e.g., first time leaving family, first time flying) and recognized ways their assumptions and beliefs changed and made new habits and identified plans of action. Follow up conversations indicated some students did follow through with their new plans of action.

While incorporating activities and opportunities for critical reflection in higher education is imperative, Guerra and Pazez (2016) argue that higher education instructors must first start with themselves and examine their own values, beliefs, and implicit biases that may be portrayed to their students. Faculty must critically reflect on their own long held assumptions and the language they use that can impact students.

### **Critical Reflection on Language**

There are times in one's life when a simple word, phrase, gesture or encounter can lead to a transformation where a shift in thinking can create a shift in pedagogical and instructional practice. A transformative shift of this nature occurred for us when we first became aware of the terminology "children with special rights" spoken by I. Soncini, a psychologist and pedagoga for the Reggio-Emilia municipality (personal communication, March 21, 2016). We long considered ourselves to be advocates for children with disabilities both having worked with children with disabilities for years as classroom teachers and currently teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in special education and inclusion. However, the introduction of the Reggio-Emilia philosophy of working with children with special rights led to a series of reflective conversations surrounding the meaning behind and messages associated with children with special *needs* vs. children with special *rights*.

Rights vs. needs? This is not a new question, as scholars and professionals who have traveled to and studied about Reggio-Emilia, Italy and their approach to education have written about the culture of inclusion surrounding children with special rights for some time (Soncini, 2012; Vakil, Freeman, & Swim, 2003). Building from the Reggio-Emilia perspective, Runswick-Cole and Hodge (2009) discuss the "power of language" where language used within the educational system can "create positive and negative images of children" (p. 198). Runswick-

Cole and Hodge argue that these images may influence educational practices as well as have social and policy implications. They call for a shift in discourse surrounding special education in order to more accurately discuss the rights of individuals with disabilities without also attaching a message of need.

We began to discuss whether a similar shift in discourse might be warranted for other common terminology within higher education courses. For example, the words "family" and "parent" are often used interchangeably within the literature, course content, and assignments. However, many argue that with ever-changing family dynamics, the word "family" may be more inclusive than "parent." Who might feel omitted when a teacher schedules a parent activity night? Who is included when a teacher refers to the same event as a family activity night? Spurred by reflective conversations of this nature, we began to ask how we might inadvertently shape our students with the words we use to describe individuals within our teaching practices. As Brookfield (2017) suggests "one can never be sure of the effect you're having on students or the meanings people take from your words and actions" (p. 2).

Reflective conversations between instructors and students surrounding terminology common in any discipline area are critical to provide the opportunity for a transformative shift to the use of more sensitive and representative language. Throughout the remainder of this article we highlight several language examples which might be opportune topics for reflective conversations between instructors and students. Strategies for fostering reflective practice around language and discourse with students in higher education courses are also included.

### **Language Examples**

It is helpful to first identify common language which might be prone to misunderstanding, exclusion, or overall ambiguity before instructors can foster reflective conversations with students regarding language use. Similar to how children with special rights vs. children with special needs motivated a reflective conversation for us, other labels, terminology, or phrases may foster thoughtful and productive conversation leading to reflective and sensitive teaching practices. Throughout this section, particular words are examined with supporting literature. The examples we provide are drawn from the education field; however, they are applicable across disciplines. For example, when speaking about people with disabilities, what unintentional message is sent if the speaker uses the terms "handicapped", "disabled", "exceptional" or "differently-abled"? All students regardless of their academic discipline will come in contact with people with disabilities in their education, workplace and community. Therefore, all instructors should be mindful of the language they use when speaking about people with disabilities. The examples provided are not an exhaustive list as there are endless interpretations for language. We simply offer a beginning from which instructors and students might build.

**Differences.** Different does not mean deficient. However, historically within multiple contexts, differences among individuals may be recast as deficits.

Cummings (2003) discusses how the differences children bring to school (e.g., racial identity, language, ability, class, gender) are often translated as deficits when compared to a dominant group (p. 39). The deficit perspective has a long history within the literature in describing various groups based on ability, racial identity, class, gender, and more (Annamma, 2016; Gorski, 2010; Valencia, 2010). Gorski (2010) describes the deficit perspective as a “symptom of larger sociopolitical conditions and ideologies borne out of complex socialization processes” (p. 2). Educators who take on a deficit perspective may point to a child’s family or culture for the child’s school failure (Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001). Educators must examine the myths that underlie the deficit perspective (e.g., “families from marginalized communities do not value education”; Volk & Long, 2005, p. 14). Given that the deficit perspective is linked heavily to ideologies, socialization processes, and misperceptions (Annamma, 2016; Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001; Gorski, 2010; Valencia, 2010), it would make sense that reflecting on the language surrounding differences would be ripe for critical reflection, personal awareness, and transformative learning.

The matter of different vs. deficient has been explored throughout the literature including with women in STEM fields (Kenney, McGee, & Bhatnagar, 2012) and through the perspective of gender and racial identity (Emdin, 2012). The power of labeling is problematic as the simple act of using a label can create associated stereotypes. Negative connotations attached to the word *difference* may denote lacking, inadequacy, or inferiority. On the other hand, differences can be celebrated and appreciated. Instructors must be cognizant when discussing differences as to not perpetuate stereotypes. Deliberate conversations about differences may be excellent opportunities to discuss intention behind language as well as the messages specific words may send.

**At-Risk.** The term at-risk is certainly not a new one within the literature. Swadner and Lubeck (1995) cite the presence of thousands of journal articles and conference papers focusing on the topic. They posit the term has become a “buzzword” where those described as at-risk are marginalized and portrayed as lacking or deficient (p. 1). Swadner and Lubeck focus on how the term at-risk is often associated with low income, non-English speakers, or those of color. Similar to the deficit perspective discussed above, blanket at-risk labeling may lead to oversimplifications, overgeneralizations, and unexamined biases. Swadner and Lubeck call for in-depth analysis of the intentions behind using the term at-risk and offer alternative terminology, “at-promise” to convey a message of possibility, potential, and uniqueness (p. 4).

In the United States educational system, the term at-risk is associated with federal funding for students who are at-risk of falling behind in developmental or learning areas. In order to receive federal and state financial support, schools must prove a risk is evident. In this situation, the term at-risk is necessary in order for students to receive supports. Thus, an examination of the term at-risk becomes complex. Some individuals may indeed be at risk and in need of support. Others may erroneously be referred to as at-risk based on their economic or racial background. The intention behind the use of the term and the implications attached then

become impactful, signaling the necessity for careful and deliberate reflection on language use.

**Striving, Thriving, and Developing Understanding.** In content areas, such as math and literacy, among others, commonly used terminology may perpetuate unintended messaging as well. For example, Johnson and Keier (2010) focus on the complicated process of learning to read and suggest rethinking the term struggling reader. They note that the literacy-learning process from the beginning is not without difficulty for most and at one point or another everyone was considered a struggling reader. Therefore, they suggest discussing the literacy-learning process in terms of striving instead of struggling. Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) went further to say that “too many young readers leave schools with identities as poor readers and failures” (p. 11). They call for continued reform in instructional practices with a focus on allowing readers to see themselves as thriving while learning to read. They argue that when students are offered tailored literacy-learning experiences built upon their strengths and are referred to and refer to themselves as thriving they may be better positioned to persevere throughout the reading acquisition process. The terminology used both by teachers and the students themselves is important.

Lewis (2014) examines labeling in terms of mathematics and calls for “reconceptualizing” how we look at and refer to children throughout the mathematical learning process (p. 351). The author suggests that many individuals face difficulty while learning mathematical concepts but the reasons for this difficulty vary. Therefore, it may be more accurate to look at learning differences rather than learning deficits. Likewise, in a discussion with one of our mathematics education colleagues, it was suggested that individuals in the midst of the mathematical learning process may be developing understanding vs. misunderstanding (E. Cunningham, personal communication, October 12, 2016). Developing understanding suggests a movement toward understanding, while misunderstanding may denote a lack of knowledge or confusion. While the distinction is slight, the messages attached are strong. Across the content areas, the terminology used to describe individuals within the learning process may have intended or unintended messages. A discourse surrounding labels within the content areas would then seem to be an advantageous exercise.

**Person-First vs. Identity-First Language.** The American Psychological Association publication manual (2019) acknowledges that the language concerning disability is “evolving...[and] the overall principle for using disability language is to maintain the integrity (worth and dignity) of all individuals as human beings” (p. 136). The publication manual stresses that individuals who are writing about disabilities take into consideration the preferences of people with disabilities; both person-first language and identity-first language should be used as appropriate.

Snow (2012) defines person-first language as placing a person before their disability and offers examples such as “people with disabilities” instead of “handicapped or disabled” or an individual “with a learning disability” instead of “learning disabled” (p. 4). The argument being that having a disability is only part

of a person and should not be the definition of that person. However, within disability studies and the disability culture more generally, others offer the identity-first perspective where the disability is seen as a point of pride and individuals choose their identity instead of others doing so for them (e.g., Dunn & Andrews, 2015). For example, Brown (2011) offers an example where, within the autism community, some self-advocates prefer the term "autistic" over a "person with autism." However, she goes further to say that not all agree and there are others who prefer the latter.

Dunn and Andrews (2015) review the arguments for using both person-first and identity-first language. In their review, they state that language surrounding disability has changed considerably and is ever-evolving. They call for "advancing cultural competence through disability language" (p. 262) where discussions relating to disability and disability terminology may result in opportunities for education and impeding the spread of stereotypes and intolerance. Whether one chooses person-first or identity-first language may be determined by context, those involved, and so forth. Perhaps the most important elements are for one to be knowledgeable, educated on the topic of disability language, sensitive to perspectives, and reflective.

**Disability Labels.** Disability, impairment, and handicap are often used interchangeably and are the most frequently used disability labels in the English language (Baglieri, 2017). Impairment refers to the characteristics of a person's body, disability is the experience of having the impairment compared to those who do not have the impairment, and handicap is the resulting experience when an individual with a disability interacts with their environment and experiences some sort of disadvantage because of their disability (Baglieri). While some advocacy groups prefer the term "disability", several euphemisms for disability are commonly used in community and educational settings. For example, the terms exceptional, physically challenged, and differently-abled are frequently used to describe individuals with disabilities. While some individuals who use such language may do so to challenge stereotypes of disability, individuals with disabilities may find those terms patronizing (Baglieri). It is imperative, therefore, that instructors and students examine their own opinions, biases, and potential misconceptions about disability labels and how such labels are reflected in their language. As Sutherland (1984) stated, "it is for people with disabilities to decide how we choose to define ourselves, and few of us choose to do so according to the prejudices of people who consider themselves able-bodied" (p. 14).

When examining the use of disability language, it is also important to recognize particular terms are associated with special rights. For example, the term disability is used in both The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA, 2008) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) affording individuals with disabilities specific rights within the United States. The terms exceptional and differently-abled do not have the same rights associated with them. Baglieri (2017) argues that individuals should use the terms disability, impairment, and handicap directly without trying to soften the language as "it is not shameful or hurtful to describe bodies, minds, their strengths, and their limits in direct

language” (p. 29). However, Garland-Thomson (2002) states that disability is a broad term that encompasses categories such as deformed, abnormal, and sick “which disadvantage people by devaluing bodies that do not conform to cultural standards” (p. 74). This highlights the vast perspectives of disability labels and how intention behind labels can vary from person to person. While there may not be a clear answer for what language to use, the act of assisting students to become aware that disability labels are complicated may help to create a profession of individuals who think before they speak.

### **Moving Forward: Where to Go from Here?**

For some, it may seem overwhelming to consider how to engage in conversations with students which are sensitive, educated, and responsive. The point is not to cause doubt, fear, and a desire to no longer engage in thoughtful discussions about individuals and associated labels. Quite the opposite, the point is to bring awareness to how we talk about others and the words we put forth in class conversations and elsewhere. The ability to design reflective conversations within university classroom contexts, where instructors and students partake in thoughtful, respectful discussion surrounding terminology that may otherwise be taken for granted, opens the door to fostering a multitude of professionals primed to consider the language they use and reflect upon why they are using it and the messages it inadvertently sends.

Ideally, and more than likely, instructors are currently reflecting upon their own use of the language examples highlighted above or other common language specific to their discipline or field of study. The key is that instructors make their critical reflection apparent and overt for their students as part of their everyday instructional practice. Equally important is for instructors to cultivate a habit in students to critically reflect upon their own implicit biases, the language they use, and the messages they are portraying. Instructors can design the learning context to include opportunities for in-depth, reflective conversations regarding specific language and meaning. Discussed below are strategies that higher education faculty can use in order to foster critical reflection and conversations surrounding language usage and associated meanings.

### **Fostering Reflective Discussions: Strategies to Use with Students**

#### **Self-Reflection and Preparation**

For critical reflection to occur within higher education settings, instructors must first reflect upon their own experiences, thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and language use (Guerra & Pazey, 2016). Critical reflection and inquiry involve the “conscious consideration of the moral and ethical implications and consequences of classroom practices on students” (Larrivee, 2000, p. 293). In this case, language modeled by instructors may have lasting implications for students and therefore, instructors must be cognizant about what it is they are saying and what messages their language carries. Careful and intentional self-reflection of one’s own language is important. Included in this self-reflection must be an examination of biases.

Furthermore, making this reflective process visible to students in the higher education setting can have lasting implications on how students approach their own learning and future professional work.

For example, we examined our use of the words rights vs. needs in terms of the special education system and discussed this reflective process with our students. This deliberate self-reflection, and the act of sharing our reflective process with students allowed for conversations about language choice and usage. It permitted students to witness the process of critical reflection and also to realize that their instructors engage in this type of deliberation.

Instructors must acknowledge the consequences of critically reflective conversations in the higher education classroom context. Discussions of this nature take time and therefore, there are technical decisions that must be attended to. When should conversations such as these take place? How much time can and should be dedicated to reflective conversations surrounding language and messaging? We suggest it is necessary to devote ample time to this reflective process in order to cultivate professionals who approach language critically and sensitively. To that end, it is advantageous for reflective conversations to take place in every class period. Students should feel free to pose alternate ideas, question the intention behind specific language, and share their thoughts or perhaps anxiety about specific topics. This requires time for open-ended discussion in both small and large groups. In addition, students may need time to reflect individually prior to discussing with a group.

Reflective conversations may open up difficult conversations where instructors and students feel unprepared. A judgement free atmosphere should be created by fostering a classroom learning environment which values open and respectful communication.

### **Learning Experiences Which Foster Transformation**

Once the environment is primed, instructors can foster reflective discussions and carve out space and time for critical conversations to take place. Mezirow (1994; 2012) discusses that for transformative learning to occur, students need to be faced with a disorienting dilemma which leads to self-reflection, discussion with others, and potentially a reconceptualization of thoughts and beliefs. Instructors may incorporate elements into the course which allow for disorienting dilemmas to occur. For example, class activities and fieldwork may be strategically designed in order to foster the development of new and challenging perspectives.

**Case studies.** The use of case studies as an instructional practice allows for students to read about a specific individual or situation and have a common foundation from which to discuss. For example, including a case study where a child is identified as at-risk for emotional and/or behavioral disorders based on her class and racial background may generate opportunities for critically reflective conversations about previous experiences, preconceived ideas, beliefs, and language. Students and instructors may draw upon the case study in order to

support, respectfully challenge, or disagree with one another. They may question whether the child is truly at-risk and what the child might be at-risk for. They may ponder whether the at-risk label is necessary for this child. They may examine the intentional and unintentional messages associated with labeling the child at-risk. They may discuss personal and societal biases. They may look at overgeneralizations and oversimplifications of at-risk in light of viewing the term through the lens of one specific child. From this case study, the instructor is able to introduce potentially sensitive topics and support students throughout the conversations. Case studies can be used across disciplines to encourage reflective conversations (e.g., a social work case study about a child in foster care; a medical case study on a child with an autoimmune disease; a criminal justice case study about an adult being detained).

**Fieldwork.** Numerous and varied field-placements also support opportunities for reflective and transformative learning. University programs can hold classes in PreK-12 school settings, invite practicing teachers to co-teach university classes, or embed field experience into the class structure where the entire class and instructor venture together into school settings (Zeichner, 2010). As another example, in the medical profession students engage in fieldwork in various stages including, but not limited to, simulated patients, apprenticeship, and residency, all of which contribute to the process of professional identity formation (Sharpless et al., 2015). These learning opportunities allow students to gain first-hand knowledge of the education/medical process but also provide common experiences for the instructor and class to reflect upon and discuss. Experiences in the field, especially experiences that create a disorienting dilemma for students, (e.g., students are placed in settings with people who are different from themselves) enable college students to continue to gather varied perspectives and practical knowledge. However, it is important for students and their instructors to reflect upon and examine the language and perceptions they encounter in the field. They can participate in conversations about their field placement encounters in order to capitalize on the potential for critical reflection and potential shifts.

**Service learning/Community engagement.** Service learning and community engagement also allow students to move away from the perceived safety of the university learning environment into contexts perhaps less familiar and out of their comfort zone. Bell and colleagues (2016) incorporated service learning and research into the curriculum of an interdisciplinary study abroad experience for students and found students not only transformed their assumptions and beliefs, but made changes to their everyday routines because of their experiences (e.g., drove their car less, conserved water). Students who are given the opportunity to encounter community issues where they exist and make an impact are exposed to new perspectives on which they may reflect and discuss. It is possible to focus community engagement or service learning projects on examining language and unintended bias. For example, a community engagement project may involve students creating and offering educationally enriched activities at a public park in a city setting. Through working with community members, families, and their children to plan the event, students will have the opportunity to better understand the needs of children and their families from various backgrounds. Rich conversations

around family make-up, family expertise, and children's needs can occur during the planning process, while implementing the activities, and following the project itself. Creating space for students to reflect throughout the planning and event process is critical for students to fully benefit from the community engagement activity and examine the impact of their language.

**Student self-reflection - journaling.** The aforementioned activities and instructional strategies may provide students with new-found perspectives from which they can draw upon throughout class discussions. However, students must also engage in solitary self-reflection. Journal writing is supported within the literature as an activity to develop reflective practices (Boud, 2001; Larrivee, 2000; Peoples, Thompson, & Murphy, 2016). Through journaling, students can organize their thoughts and beliefs, revisit certain events and recapitulate specific occurrences, contemplate new or varying perspectives, critique alternating viewpoints, and prepare comments in a safe and personal space. Through journal entries, students internally grapple with what they believe, feel, agree, or disagree with. Journaling also provides students the opportunity to coordinate their thoughts prior to engaging in a more public class discussion. For example, an environmental science instructor may include student self-reflection journaling as an assignment after visiting urban areas to identify alternative energy solutions. Students may reflect on the environment, challenges the community faces, strengths of the community, and preconceived notions they had before visiting the site. Students may journal how their views have changed and why. While it is an assignment, the instructor does not collect the journals; instead, the instructor provides time in class for students to share their thoughts if they feel comfortable.

Instructors may offer journal prompting questions which focus students on contemplating language and terminology. Prompting questions may include: *Reflect on specific labels which you use in your everyday life. Why do you use them? Are they necessary? What might be the intended or unintended messages attached to these labels?* If the intention is to allow students time to process and prepare for reflective conversations surrounding language use, it is possible that journals should remain private and not attached to grades (Boud, 2001).

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Throughout this article, we posit that intentional and supported conversations surrounding language usage are important aspects of the higher education learning context. An important principle to teach higher education students is that reflection on one's language is a skill that will enhance all aspects of their professional disposition. To achieve this goal in our own courses we are participating in regular self-reflection of the language we use with our students. We are creating welcoming and caring environments where students feel safe to take risks, empowered to ask questions, and respectfully disagree. We are modeling reflective and critical processes with our students during class discussions and fostering in our students a duty to do the same. We are carving out space and time in class to engage in difficult conversations surrounding bias (implicit and explicit), prejudice, inequities, and unintended messages. We are participating in activities and assignments that

stretch students to think beyond language and labels as generalizations and see people as individuals who deserve the respect to be identified in a way they feel most comfortable. Further, having discussions about the implications of language usage opens the door for a broader conversation about unintended messages sent in our gestures and actions as well as unrecognized biases. We do all of this in an open and intentional manner so that we may embolden a generation of individuals who look beyond labels and question historically accepted terminology and messages as status quo. And, we engage in ongoing examination of our practices to better understand how they are impacting our students.

We believe the same critical reflection of language must occur in other fields and disciplines in the higher education context. For example, a finance instructor who only uses the pronouns he/his when speaking about business owners may send a message to their students that business owners are primarily male. A nursing instructor who speaks about the nursing workforce using the pronouns she/her may offend male nursing students and also send unintended messages about the nursing profession as a whole. In the nursing and finance examples, when students then enter the work force they may use that same language and alienate potential clients and colleagues. While each discipline and field of study is unique, it is necessary to consider the commonly used language within that field or discipline, contemplate what intended and unintended messages may be relayed with the use of such language, and decide if there is room to adapt language to be more inclusive.

It is difficult to determine the right language to use in every case. Context, reflection, and examining intention are all important elements to consider. As instructors, we must help our students to approach language and labels with forethought. The questions to ask are: What is the intention behind the language being used? And how might the person receiving this language feel? When individuals approach language with intention and empathy, they create a more inclusive, representative, and sensitive context for successful relationships to form and strengthen. Intentional, overt, and reflective discussions surrounding language and implicit bias within higher education learning contexts are a step toward fostering and nurturing a community of professionals across numerous disciplines.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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