

Intern Perceptions of Dialect
And Regionalism

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Intern Perceptions of Dialect and Regionalism

In an intensive course at The University of Tampa, Education majors apply a broadly inclusive definition as they study diversity. They explore primary source documents about the following diversity topics that include racism, ethnicity, religion, regionalism and sexual orientation. Having read, written about and discussed these themes, students apply a new awareness of diversity issues and concerns as they develop lesson plans and units for the learning environments they encounter during the same semester in their pre-internship.

Dialect emerges as a provocative topic within the context of regionalism. In this discussion, regionalism refers to a belief that one's region of origin is a primary determinant of the quality of one's standards of living, social forms, customary beliefs, levels of sophistication, intellect and aesthetic development and that regional differences produce an inherent superiority of persons from particular regions. Students examine how, on the basis of regionalism and dialect-related prejudice, people in general and learners in particular, are given or are denied opportunity. A number of multilogues on the topic of regionalism and dialects occur with fellow students and Appalachian faculty.

Self perception, as expressed in written reflection, is used to identify intern perceptions during the semester with respect to dialect and regionalism and the implications of those for learning environments. This study reports how dialect-related perceptions evolve within an intensive course designed to transform learner awareness about diversity issues.

Areas for analysis include perceptions of dialect and regionalism as they relate to intellect and levels of sophistication, the origin of stereotypes and one's involvement in stereotype reinforcement. Also included are intern perceptions of their developing awareness of language bias, the power of bias and how individuals manipulate dialect to protect themselves from discrimination even as others work hard to cling to stereotypes. Last are thoughts about what needs to occur in classrooms and the challenge to handle dialect-related concerns in the classroom. It is expected that the results from this study will be relevant for all who prepare and implement learning scenarios.

Course Philosophy

My approach with teachers-in-the-making has been to introduce and reinforce the notion that, in truth, there is no *we* and *they*, except in the most appealing sense of those terms. I do this by helping interns acquaint themselves with the diversity that exists within them (their own family diversity histories), and then by exploring the amount of diversity that exists within that seemingly mainstream classroom community. If one can recognize that oneself and one's colleagues and friends *are* diverse, one becomes more open to acknowledge the oppression humans suffer because of their diverse circumstances.

When authentic acknowledgement of these perspectives occurs, empathy and behaviors change.

In the course, the diversity curriculum door is kept wide open. All diversity, even left and right handedness, is included in course content. By contrast, most people understand diversity first and foremost as a reference to race. To diminish that misconception, race is not specifically introduced as a topic until half way through the course, when learners

have become more comfortable and honest about their own diverse nature, that of their colleagues and that of others.

Methodology

Interns enrolled in the course read an article written by myself (O'Hara, 200) about my experiences with regionalism and dialect (see excerpt below) and were asked to respond to the content of the article in writing and in a conversation in class.

Interns were shown a video entitled *American Tongues*. In this video individuals express their thoughts on dialects and the relationship between dialect, region and human perceptions. The individuals interviewed in the film are very forthcoming about their biases (sometimes bigotry), their region-related struggles and their related concerns.

After viewing the film, interns were asked to respond/react to the content of the film in a conversation in class and in writing. Some students opted as well to respond/react to the article, films and conversation in their *summative self evaluation* that is collected after interns receive their grade for the course. All intern comments included in this paper were gleaned from the written class assignment and the summative self evaluation (collected after grades were assigned). Intern written work was then selected using the research topics as a lens, essentially on the basis of how directly the writing responded to the various topics.

Except from "Regionalism" Article

When I moved away from home, I began to be exposed to West Virginia incest and trailer jokes told in "proper environments in other states." Recently, I heard one of my UT colleagues make a West Virginia comment. I never understood that incest stereotype. What is the source of the incest claims that West Virginians have higher incest rates than individuals in other states. I have wondered. Do researchers really study and document such things, and if so, how? "Excuse me. We're conducting a study: are you molesting or have you impregnated your daughter? Thank you. I'll be sure to mark you in the 'yes' column."

Seriously, what valid measure of incest rates could possibly exist? If valid measures do not exist, who creates such stereotypes, and for what purpose? It is clear that some enjoy any situation in which they elevate themselves over large populations of people. Hitler made a career out of the elitist predilections of some of his people (we see such phenomena today in the United States). Some individuals would surely be disappointed that I was not molested by a parent or other family members. It is interesting to note that in recent years, incest, in other states, is referred to as child abuse.

I am amazed at how tenaciously people cling to derogatory stereotypical information about others but how correspondingly irresponsible they are about confirming the data.

One of my students asked why I dropped my West Virginia accent. Was it so that I could be given opportunity? I noted that my objective was not to be given opportunity but rather to avoid being denied opportunity by narrow-minded individuals who would judge my intellect or competence by the way I pronounced my vowels. One of my African American students nodded in agreement. In the past I had used the dialect gear shift when I sensed a particular tone in a gatekeeper's manner.

Consider: Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, Montana and some other states-what images come to mind, and what are their sources? Are those images from our own experience or have we willingly accepted the negative portrayals and images seen on television and film and in literature as factual? How may stereotypes were reinforced by the Beverly Hillbillies series alone? Who stands to gain from such large-scale stereotyping? Someone must.

One thing is for certain: Americans are too willing to allow the media to dictate to them their opinions, tastes, preferences and biases. When people buy into and perpetuate myths, such as when they disparage West Virginia, they belittle themselves and my family.

During the course of the 20th Century, expressions of prejudice in public and private forums, against African Americans, certain religions, the disabled, for example, has become less acceptable. Other groups have not fared as well, however. The expression of region-related, age-related and size-related bigotry is

common. It occurs frequently and with apology. The dilemma of coping with bigotry and all of its negative consequences remains.

Findings (excerpted from intern writings)

Regionalism, Intellect and Levels of Sophistication

The press and television tend to paint images of certain states as being the breeding ground for dumb, incestuous hillbillies who are minus teeth and sipping on a jug of homemade moonshine. West Virginia, unfortunately, is certainly one of the most picked on states.

I wonder at the mentality of our nation when so many supposedly “educated” Americans can buy into the stupidity and stereotyping of an entire state. I understand disgust with regionalism as I too have a beloved, much misunderstood state in my heart. That is the state of New Jersey. Boy! Are the citizens of New Jersey a long-standing joke! It’s a shame that people forget to stop and think of the beauty of states like West Virginia and New Jersey. New Jersey is the Garden State. It has bountiful green farms and stunning crystal clear shore line. I too find myself quite dismayed with the individuals who buy into the myth. We actually attend the theater and frequent Art Museums. Shame on all of those small, narrow minded people?

Jennifer Mikolajczyk

I had never really thought about the existence stereotyping based on regions *within* the United States, or if I thought about it I never thought about it on a level that was discussed in the article. It is evident that it is something that is very real and exists on

more than just a cursory level. I know that for some people, hiding their accent is a way for them to escape certain stereotypes.

I especially related to the example of the Beverly Hillbillies because I have been exposed to that program. Even though people are exposed to images everyday, ultimately it is up to *them* to decide if they want to believe those images or not and thus form perceptions about them. One way to prevent these negative stereotypes from forming is for people to be exposed to hard, cold facts rather than just what is portrayed in the media.

Peta-Gaye Lennox

Regionalism, Joking and the Origin of Stereotypes

I was under the impression that all Bostonians said “park the car” in the same way, but the movie showed otherwise. I found it ironic that Northerners thought people in the south sounded ignorant and racist based on how they talked. I never really paid much attention to regionalism until now. I also never considered how regionalistic jokes got started and never considered them to be true. I didn’t think people in West Virginia really slept with their brothers or sisters.

Being from New Jersey, the knock on us is that we are the worst drivers around, but you need to consider that New Jersey is the most densely populated state, so more accidents are likely to occur. I admit, I’ve heard jokes about West Virginia and I’ve probably told a few, also. I never considered how the jokes got started or how the people in West Virginia felt about the jokes, mainly because I did not know anyone from there. No harm was ever meant. Growing up in New Jersey, on a dairy farm, I heard all kinds of jokes about how people in the south were rednecks and hicks and not very bright.

John Kanach

One's Involvement in Stereotype Reinforcement

I'm ashamed to admit that I've made plenty of Alabama jokes, seeing as my last home is so close to the Alabama line. Of course I would commit this faux pas, I have no sense of regional pride. As an army child, I've lived in four states. I understand now that in my ignorance, I could offend someone from that particular area. I would never have told those Alabama jokes in my classroom, but I certainly would have in the teacher's lounge. This isn't the image I want to present for myself; I do not wish to be seen as a bigot. I am so shocked and I'm disappointed that biased words came from my fellow teachers. Would they take these generalizations into the classroom? If they had a student from West Virginia, would they talk down to him? It's a scary thought that those of us that should accept everyone unconditionally have some of the most damaging biases.

Leah Urban

Developing Awareness of Language Bias and the Power of Bias

Before, I had the general attitude that people who do not speak standard English haven't been well educated because you are supposed to be taught to speak "correctly" in school (pronouncing vowels, etc.)? I tended to think that I, in fact, do speak standard English, however, I see that this may not be the case. I like it because that's what I am used to and can understand.

I am beginning to suspect that first impression of people are based largely on judgments about dialect and stereotypes about these dialects. I now know that I have suffered from being stereotyped by others, but also, that I do the same to other people. I think that it is very hard to stop making these judgments because they happen automatically, but now

that I am aware of it, I can try to put these judgments in their place (the trashcan). I hated being judged so arbitrarily, so I know that prejudice has no basis on truth. It has to do with suppositions based on superficial characteristics.

Lea Holloway

I thought it was interesting that people would be able to tell what kind of personality and attitude people had by the words and way they talked. Another fact is that within one state you can have many different dialects.

Lindsay Stumpf

I was shocked to see that people view something as trivial as an accent to be so important. I think it may be because I consider myself to speak “generically” like the video states. I was aware that many people thought southern accents sounded ignorant but I didn’t think it was such a big deal. I will admit that being from Florida I often think people from New York or New Jersey sound harsh when they speak. It was interesting to see people from both the North East and South East say that they had been made to feel inferior or dumb because of their accent. I just love listening to them, it sounds like music to me.

Melissa Lemmons

I never really thought of regionalism and regional accents as such a controversial issue. Maybe because it is so prevalent in all forms of the media, many have come to accept stereotypes that emerge. I think that before this class in some way I was guilty of accepting the stereotypes that have been portrayed in the media. Not to say that I believed the stereotypes (for example the hillbilly image) but I just didn’t put much

thought into the impact it might have on others; say others who are likely to believe the stereotypes. Now I think that I put more thought into the implications of these images. It was amazing to watch the video and hear some of the things that people said about their fellow Americans. I don't think that many people realize that there is no perfect English dialect/accents that is superior to all others. I have always believed that everyone has an accent, there is not one way of talking that is just bland. In the United States there might be a way of talking that sounds to other Americans as if there is no accent but to me every American has an accent. I didn't think that I had an accent when I was surrounded by people who all speak like me, but to people who are not Jamaican, of course I have an accent.

Before this class I never put much thought into the negative stigma that might be attached to a person based on their accent. I suppose because, in my own experience, my accent has often been greeted with positive reactions. Even in Jamaica I was brought up in an environment where I was always encouraged to "speak properly." But as with anywhere, there are different accents within my country. Thus, there are certain accents at home that are looked down upon. I never put much thought into what those negative perceptions might have on the persons with those particular accents. I think about it more now and question why this is so because again who decides that one Jamaican accent is superior to another? No one really has the right or authority to do so.

Peta-Gaye Lennox

Region, Race and the Manipulation of Dialect for Protection

I often use "Blade English" with close friends from home and especially family. I know how to "turn it off" when I get inside a school setting or a professional environment. I

don't think of it as changing my accent for good, but I do it purposefully so that I can be clearly understood.

I remember that I used to get irritated when one of my friends would say, "you're real country, yo!" Being from New York, I thought that the "yo's" on the end of sentences were real corny. Now, I just smile and say, "I know". It is very interesting how accents can identify the regions that people are from and suggest some characteristics of individuals. The southern accent is very relaxed, slow, and drawn out while northern accents are fast and to the point.

Erin Thorpe

How Regionalism Impacts Individuals and How They Cope

Regionalism implies biases placed on a person based on the region they come from. One very important concept in the article is how regionalism affects the people that are being stereotyped. Dr. O'Hara talks about the stereotypes of West Virginia and how these biases affected him. He had to change his accent so that he would have equal opportunity for jobs and such. Dr. O'Hara presents a critical element in his reasoning. It was not that he changed his accent to be given opportunity, but not to be denied opportunity.

The very idea of accents is interesting. How can an accent denote a certain type of person? Should the region a person is from indicate what type of person they are? Dr. O'Hara presents this idea clearly when he encourages the reader to consider states like Mississippi, Kentucky and Alabama. What types of stereotypes can be generated by simply naming these states? A great deal, indeed.

Kristina Orlando

Clinging to Stereotypes

An important related concept is that of how people will cling to these stereotypes, but in turn have little or no realistic information to confirm or support their arguments. The compliance to media as a large source of the problem in terms of reinforcing biases, makes them more acceptable to society.

Kristina Orlando

Stereotypes vs. Contrary Evidence

I have heard the stereotypes of the uncultured, uneducated hicks from Alabama or the inbred folks of Kansas and Kentucky. How were these ideas developed and confirmed, and how is it that they have become such common and believable notions to people that have never even bothered to visit these places? Having family in Kansas and friends in Kentucky, I understand that these stereotypes do not hold true. But what about populations who are unexposed to people from these places? It is these people who mark a twang or slow speech as a sign of an uneducated individual. As a future educator, this idea is pressing to me, because although all children may receive equal opportunity in my classroom, they may not in a society based on the region they were born or on their accents.

Kristina Orlando

What to Do in the Classroom

I have learned that I must foster a classroom that denies stereotypes like these, but also teaches children that these stereotypes exist. How do I as a teacher, change the views children have already been taught in their homes, and is it even my place to do so? With the extreme amounts of prejudice, based on varied factors and characteristics, how do I teach against all of these? This is not an easy thing to do.

We are forced to look at how different prejudices are manifesting themselves and to try to create an environment that supports all types of diversity. Although a teacher may not be able to expel all instances of prejudice in the classroom, it is crucial that they are aware of these and work on ways to deal with instances that may occur in their classroom. Also, it is important to set up a classroom environment and activities that focus on respect for diversity and that unite students based on differences, not that divide them.

Kristina Orlando

The Challenge to Effectively Handle Dialect-Related Concerns in the Classroom

I think that dialect is as much an important part of one culture as food, customs, or anything else. It's sad to think that people try to change the way they speak to be accepted in society or the work force. My desire is that all people maintain their culture in every way, even their language. It's a part of preserving and even celebrating diversity.

I do, however, have one concern in relation to dialect. My concern is in regards to the effect that dialect will have on a child's ability to learn to read, write and spell. Will allowing and accepting all dialects as equal hinder some speakers of certain dialect in

academic areas? Should there be different methods of spelling created for different dialects? Or will all people be responsible for standard spellings of words based on standard English? As it remains today, that is the case. And although I would desire for every person to maintain their regional dialect, I also desire for my students to be successful in school and in the world. This brings up a troubling roadblock. Sometimes what seems best for a child or a person's emotional well being is not always what will be best for their success in the future. I am not yet sure how I will deal with this issue in my future classroom. This is the first time I have been exposed to ideas about regionalism and dialect and I still have much to learn before coming to a conclusion.

Helen Wright

Conclusion

The interns whose thoughts are reported here demonstrate an awareness of bias, bigotry and discrimination on the basis of dialect and region as well as how stereotypes are created and reinforced by the media, how regionalism may be affecting their own communities and how dialect-related bias and regionalism emerge within a particular state or even within a particular community. Interns are grappling with the extent to which they have been participants in regionalistic behaviors and in the reinforcement and perpetuation of stereotypes on the basis of region and dialect.

Interns are concerned with how such participation might have manifested in their role as professional educators, *if* they had not been led to consider the insidious nature of all bigotry, particularly in this example, regionalism. Interns discuss their observation that regionalism and dialect-related bias thoughts and behaviors may emerge "automatically" and that an awareness of this process allows one to choose not to participate. Interns

report that others, however, may hold on tightly to their bigotry and stereotypes even in the face of starkly contrasting information.

Moreover, interns ask what their role needs to be in terms of how to help learners to reconsider their views. Interns convey their intention to create learning spaces that are safe for all members of the learning community. Unsafe learning environments unfortunately are created by teachers or are allowed to continue by teachers. Few would argue against the effort to take learning environments further in the direction of safety for all learners. This study demonstrates that awareness of bias and its unhealthy consequences can be facilitated in interns along with their commitment to create safe learning environments when they enter the education profession.

References

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