



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Seeking Excellence? Ask the Staff—An Update

In an earlier *Innovation Abstracts* it was reported that the office personnel at Schoolcraft College had created a unique staff development program in which they met and shared ideas and made recommendations for the improvement of the college. Most of the recommendations were not about what others should do for them but about *what they wanted to do for themselves*. Those recommendations included: the development of an orientation program for new clerical employees, complete with a buddy system; the establishment of a job exchange program that would help them better understand the interrelationships of people and responsibilities of various offices; the development of a recognition system for clerical employees; and the development of a pad of college maps, helpful for locating classrooms and offices on campus. All of these recommendations were implemented at the college.

Soon afterward, a new group of staff members were selected and met to inject new ideas into the program. The program was divided into six different issues, with a subcommittee for each. Each subcommittee was given an animal name that identified it with its specific emphasis. For example:

Dolphin—"Communication and Learning to Express Yourself Well"

Eagle—"Hints to Help Employees Soar High in Job Performance"

Each subcommittee met periodically and discussed ideas relevant to its focus. The most outstanding ideas were sent back to the coordinating committee, which had continued to provide overall planning and coordination for the program. The coordinating committee then reviewed these ideas and forwarded them to their respective areas of responsibility. Some of the recommendations that were implemented include:

1. conducting workshops on telephone etiquette and speaking before groups;
2. creating special sections of computer classes for college employees at convenient times;
3. creating a "Did You Know?" tablet sent to each office for the convenience of writing a message or announcement;
4. creating an incentive program for perfect attendance

(Each employee is given a specific number of sick days and personal use days. The subcommittee suggested a reward, such as tickets to a college dinner dance or dinner theater, for those whose days were kept to a minimum or not used at all.);

5. developing an office assistance program where help can be provided to various college offices during peak periods;
6. distributing information about the college's new telephone system, including the direct dialing numbers of the staff;
7. developing a physical fitness program that includes swimming, exercise, and a golf league.

Some of the recommendations currently under development include:

1. the improvement of recorded messages on the telephone system—to be more helpful to the public and students who are trying to register for classes;
2. the creation of computer scheduling—to make it possible for secretaries to access appointments and vacations when setting up meetings.

The program at our college provides opportunities for the office staff to become involved in defining and participating in the improvement of their job situations. It encourages, and even demands, open communication between work groups and supervisors. It earns the employees new respect and recognition for their creative ideas. It has even helped them develop trust in the leadership of the college, because their suggestions are heard and implemented. As a result, the college is benefiting by the improvement of the quality of the work performed, and the individual is working in a job that has become more personally satisfying and provides opportunities for growth. In our quest for excellence, we still ask our staff—our most valuable resource.

Richard W. McDowell, *President*

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Making Sense of Babel

Striking epithets like "Dumbbell English" and "Bonehead English" indicate in a colorful, even euphonious way some of our students' preconceptions about our first-level developmental English course, English 101. They also prepare those of us who teach it to expect from some students an occasional measure of sullenness, if not actual resistance or hostility. However, they don't prepare us for all the student attitudes we discover in this course, which, perhaps to a greater extent than any other on our campus, attracts a large mix of linguistic heritages.

Non-native speakers, especially in an English class, often feel a kind of academic isolation, an isolation commonly manifested in their natural tendency to sit only with others of like background. This academic isolation is not surprising, nor are its causes elusive; however, effective methods of mitigating this isolation are elusive.

Because of several years of graduate work in linguistics, I have identified a way of making these non-native speakers feel more at home in my classes. These days I can conjure up bits and pieces, oddments and orts, from just about any language. Armed with these linguistic scraps, I set out to legitimize the native languages of those in my class who are tackling English as their second, third, ...nth language.

Because Spanish is always well represented in an English 101 class, I make use of many contrastive examples right away. For instance, when I deal with subject/verb agreement problems, I contrast the simple English choices of *speak* and *speaks* with the more challenging and interesting Spanish choices: *hablo, hablas, habla, hablamos, hablais, hablan*. The Spanish speakers in the class eagerly volunteer to provide the Spanish versions. They are both surprised and pleased to realize that in this case, at least, they have mastered a paradigm far more complex than the English example presents.

All this has a salutary effect on the native speakers. Most have the impression that Spanish is an easy language (compare the number of Spanish classes we offer to those in French, German, and Latin). I purposely choose data that will counter-exemplify this notion so that Spanish will become a more "worthy" language in their linguistically naive minds.

If many English speakers think of Spanish as an easy language, just as many think of Vietnamese as an impossibly difficult one. Interestingly, Vietnamese

students are more eager than Hispanics to see their language written on the board to illustrate a point about English; they usually want to take the chalk from my hand to add the correct diacritics to my scrawl. I let them. Here is one example I use:

Toi gap nhan-ac
I see villain

Toi da gap nhan-ac
I saw villain

Toi se gap nhan-ac
I will see villain

The result for native English speakers is that Vietnamese is demystified a little bit and becomes a real language.

When my native English speakers complain about confusing plurals, I'll ask an Arabic speaker to show us how plural infixes work in her language: *kitab*, book; *kutub*, books. As she proudly goes on to give examples of the complex system of articles in Arabic, the English speakers sigh with relief and with new respect for Arabic.

My Japanese students will show us how the verb always comes last in their sentences, prompting more than one native English speaker to scratch his head and mutter, "But that doesn't make any sense." A few years ago I had a Native American student who knew a few words of Luiseño, enough to show the rest of us how a whole bunch of participles are piled up onto Luiseño verbs. And just this semester a young woman from Kenya showed us how the verb in Swahili must carry semantic class agreement markers for all the primary nouns in the sentence.

Exploring these other languages in an academic setting in the dominant culture validates them and their speakers, as well. They are pleased to be included in this intimate way, for language-sharing is indeed intimacy. The English speakers profit just as much, maybe more; they learn not only that English isn't that hard, but that it isn't even that special.

As for me, I suppose I did not have to study linguistics in order to do this stuff. It just worked out that way. I have more fun teaching now, and I do it better! I, too, enjoy the intimacy.

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