

Patrick Edward Marlow\*, Wendy Whitehead Martelle,  
Joan Parker Webster and Kelly Kealy

# It isn't sloppy language: exploring the discourse of Village English

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**Abstract:** In Alaska, as elsewhere in the United States, standardized American English is privileged over both local varieties of English and Indigenous languages. This privileged position is maintained, in part, through a deficit model of language acquisition and a model of school success which locates the source of underachievement among K-12 students within the child rather than within the broader sociopolitical context of school and schooling. Using a critical participatory action research approach, this article examines a single graduate course for K-12 teachers intended to address ideologies of linguistic deficit and demonstrate that the varieties of English spoken by adults and children in Southwest Alaska are systematic and rule-governed. Data are analyzed in terms of trajectories of learning, focusing on three distinct points within this trajectory: Pre-course questionnaire, Mid-point questionnaire and post-course artifacts (e.g., final projects for the master's degree). Through the lens of discourse analysis (Gee, James Paul. 2010. *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*, 3rd edn. New York, NY: Routledge), we illustrate and discuss the tensions inherent in shifting discourse models as the teachers contend with course content that challenges broadly accepted explanations for school underachievement.

**Keywords:** standardization; semilingualism; bilingual education; D/discourse; minority dialect; indigenous education

## 1 Introduction

The student's learning is being held back with the Yup'ik teaching system and I'm sure it shows on the tests .... The school is there to teach the kids English to pass the ENGLISH HSGQE'S (Letter to the Editor, Delta Discovery 09/19/07).

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**\*Corresponding author: Patrick Edward Marlow**, Department of Linguistics, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK, USA, E-mail: [pemarlow@alaska.edu](mailto:pemarlow@alaska.edu). <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9573-1479>

**Wendy Whitehead Martelle, Joan Parker Webster and Kelly Kealy**, Department of Linguistics, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK, USA

I just want for my daughter to be taught in English first. She will learn Yup'ik as well. If she is strong in one language, then she will be strong in others as well. The problem, I think, is that there are students who are not strong in either language. As a result, they're retained until the required subjects are learned (Letter to the Editor, *Delta Discovery* 09/26/07).

I refer to 'Bush English' as the English language that cannot whatsoever compete in the western world's business society (Letter to the Editor, *Delta Discovery* 10/03/07).

In Alaska, as elsewhere in the United States, standardized American English (SAE) is privileged over both local varieties of English (referred to above as 'Bush English') and Indigenous languages (here Yup'ik) (Cain 2005; Green 2002; Marlow 2004; Wolfram 1993, 1999; Wyman 2012). In the quotes above from the Letters to the Editor section of the regional newspaper, this privileging of SAE is linked to a language deficit model in which teaching in the Indigenous language (Yup'ik) is directly linked to low test scores (09/19/07), the 'problem' is identified as a lack of language development 'in either language' (09/26/07), and unemployment is blamed on speaking a local and stigmatized variety of English (10/03/07).

We maintain that the deficit models of language acquisition and school success evidenced in these Letters to the Editor locate the source of underachievement within the child rather than within the broader sociopolitical context of school and schooling. We link the phrase "not strong in either language" directly to the work of Cummins (1979, 1980). Under his threshold hypothesis, Cummins (1980) claimed that developing a bilingual child's two languages sufficiently will result in cognitive benefits. However, failure to develop "native-like skills in both languages ... [has] detrimental cognitive and academic consequences" for that child, a state Cummins referred to as "semilingualism" (1979: 228) and Rosa (2016) equates to the racialized notion of "languagelessness". Following Martin-Jones and Romaine (1986) we link the notions of subtractive bilingualism (Lambert 1975; Swain 1979), BICS (basic interpersonal communicative competence) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) (Cummins 1980) directly to the concept of semilingualism and the deficit model it encapsulates. While a thorough critique of Cummins arguments is beyond the scope of this paper (please see Baker 2006; MacSwan 2000; Martin-Jones and Romaine 1986 and the works cited there), three primary critiques include:

1. Semilingualism locates the source of school underachievement within the child rather than within the broader sociopolitical context of school and schooling.
2. School based tests used to identify semilingual individuals are by definition an indirect and limited measure of actual language use, normed on the language abilities of monolingual speakers of the majority academic language or variety. Such tests are therefore unable to measure the full range of language abilities of bilingual and/or minority variety speakers.
3. Language is first and foremost an oral medium. Literacy (in the sense of reading and writing) is at best a culture-specific and poor representation of an oral medium. Literacy related skills are therefore not a meaningful measure of linguistic development.

Following MacSwan (2000) we acknowledge that in Cummins', in his later work (1981, 1994), distanced himself from, and openly acknowledged the negative connotations associated with the term semilingualism while continuing to insist that "the condition denoted by the term [semilingualism] does exist" (p. 5). The continuing appeal and influence of semilingualism is found in the rise and ongoing popularity of language gap/word gap explanations for poor outcomes for minority and lower socio-economic status (SES) children (Fernald et al. 2013; Halle et al. 2009; Hart and Risley 1995). While a critique of these arguments is likewise beyond the scope of this paper (please see García and Otheguy 2016; Johnson 2015; Wyman et al. 2010 and the works cited there), it is worth pointing out that the difference between the two concepts lies with where the proponents focus their attention. If the focus is on the child, then they lack sufficient language development to succeed in school; they are semilingual. If the focus is on the family, the child's lack of language development is blamed on the deficient language learning environment of low SES and minority households; the family has created a language gap.

While we recognize the many ways these and similar concepts can and do circulate in the literature on minority schooling and language development, we choose to use the term semilingualism throughout this paper. For us, (as for MacSwan 2000) the negative connotations of the term most clearly and appropriately underscore the misidentification, tracking and lowered expectations of Yup'ik and other minority children in the classroom.

In this paper we consider a single course offering for certified teachers pursuing an MA in Second Language Acquisition Teacher Education intended to directly address ideologies of linguistic deficit. The specific goal of the course was to demonstrate that the varieties of English spoken by adults and children in Southwest Alaska, are systematic and rule-governed. Colloquially these varieties are referred to as Village English or (as above) Bush English. We prefer the term Alaska Regional Englishes (AREs) as this term emphasizes the village to village and region to region variation inherent in these varieties. For this discussion, however, we will refer to Southwest Alaska Regional English (SWARE) in the singular in recognition of the similarities in varieties found across the region. However, it should also be noted that in quotations the term Village English may be used.

## 2 Context

### 2.1 Southwest Alaska Regional English (SWARE)

Southwest Alaska Regional English (SWARE) may be described as a general regional dialect of English as spoken in Southwestern Alaska, specifically the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and Bristol Bay regions. Some notable features of this dialect

include, medial strengthening rather than flapping of /t/ (e.g., *middle* pronounced /mɪˈtʃl/), lack of prepositions (e.g., *go to* becomes *go*), and a general lack of articles (e.g., “Do you want to go to the store?” becomes *You wanna go store?*). Some common vocabulary for the dialect includes *bum* ‘bad’, *jig* ‘to fish without a reel’, *let X Y* ‘to cause X to do Y’, *lazy* ‘momentarily disinclined to act’, *poor*, a rendering of Yup’ik *nakleng* ‘poor thing’, and the adverbial phrase *sometimes always*, ‘to perform an act continually on a recurring (perhaps annual) basis’ (e.g. *I sometimes always pick berries*. ‘Every season, I am constantly picking berries’) (For a discussion of Central Yup’ik aspect, see Mithun and Ali 1996).

While no comprehensive description of SWARE exists, Jacobson (1984) describes the origins of “Yup’ik-influenced English” as a likely combination of grammatical influences from Central Yup’ik, imported dialect features and vocabulary from miners, prospectors and other native English speakers, as well as features that arose on their own “but have lasted through the years because the Yup’ik area has remained rather isolated ...” (29).

Forty years since Jacobson’s publication, Southwestern Alaska remains relatively isolated, as access to the region and its villages remains strictly by air, boat and snowmobile. Yet schooling, mass media and the internet continue to exercise a standardizing influence on local Englishes. The result is a complex linguistic ecology in which varieties of English and Central Yup’ik coexist and interact on both individual and community levels.

## 2.2 Background on the programs and their design and intention

The course offering discussed here was part of a much larger, multiyear, multigrant initiative.

Between 2002 and 2011 the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) oversaw six projects, which were intended to improve the quality of both Yup’ik and English language instruction in K-12 contexts in Southwestern Alaska (Marlow and Siekmann 2012, 2013). A central goal woven throughout all six projects was for all programs to be locally defined and locally staffed. Toward this end, all program development and candidate selection was done through regular face-to-face and often weekly audio conference meetings with regional partners. While the list of regional partners was sometimes expanded, all six projects were undertaken in partnership with the Alaska Native Language Center and Kuskokwim Campus at UAF, Lower Kuskokwim and Lower Yukon school districts, and the Association of Village Council Presidents, a local Alaska Native non-profit organization representing approximately 50 regional villages and associated tribes. Regional partners were asked to define program

content, goals and intended outcomes, while UAF faculty recast the content, goals and outcomes in ways that would make sense to the University.

Serious work at the graduate level started with the Second Language Acquisition Teacher Education (SLATE) proposal (2006–2010), and continued with the Alaska Native Education: Computer Assisted Language Learning (ANE-CALL) proposal (2012–2015) discussed here. Both of these projects provided support for up to twenty certified teachers to pursue an MA in Applied Linguistics with a focus on teaching either English or an Alaska Native Language (most commonly Central Yup'ik), as well as four Alaska Native teachers to pursue doctoral level study of Second Language Acquisition and Teaching. While SLATE and ANE-CALL students all “did” the same programs, they built on each other in the sense that three Alaska Native SLATE PhD graduates became ANE-CALL faculty and three SLATE MA graduates pursued PhDs under ANE-CALL.

All new graduate students in Applied Linguistics at the University of Alaska Fairbanks must take LING 601, Principles of Linguistic Analysis. This course is intended to be a general introduction to the field of Linguistics and typically covers the major divisions of linguistic structure (Phonetics/Phonology, Morphology, Syntax) as well as several more applied topics (e.g., language change, language acquisition, sociolinguistics). As in any introductory course, the purpose is to introduce the students to the field rather than provide specific expertise in any one subfield.

In order to counter a discourse of semilingualism among some community members and school personnel, the faculty drew on Wolfram's (1993, 1999) work in developing Dialect Awareness programs in K-12 settings, which contain “activities that are intended to promote an understanding of, and appreciation for, language variation” (Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 337). Wolfram and Schilling (2016) propose that dialect awareness programs focus on the naturalness of language variation, where students can examine dialects in their own community (and beyond) and play an active role in documenting their dialect(s). Moreover, through the use of inductive activities, dialect awareness programs can enable students to see that dialects have patterns, which can allow them to reflect on their language use in different situations. However, as Adger et al. (2007) note, few K-12 teachers have a comprehensive background in linguistics, and these teachers “are likely to require background explanation and teaching tips for a dialect awareness unit” (156). The faculty therefore decided to approach this issue by teaching LING 601 Principles of Linguistic Analysis as a dialect awareness unit.

## 2.3 Course design

Our approach to LING 601 was centered on collaborative discovery learning by means of student-developed projects on Southwest Alaska Regional English

(SWARE), also called Village English. As SWARE is stigmatized in a similar way to African American Vernacular English (AAVE, also known as Black English, Black English Vernacular, or Ebonics), AAVE was used as the model dialect (Green 2002) to introduce the students to standard linguistic subfields (Language Attitudes, Phonetics/Phonology, Lexicon, Morpho-Syntax, Speech Events). After being introduced to the linguistic concepts through AAVE, each of the student groups then applied those principles to SWARE.

Using a structural model of linguistic description, the course content and projects focused on recognizing and analyzing the internal structure and regularity of these varieties. We recognize that this approach explicitly abstracts language away from its use and users and as such, the course did not explicitly address the racialized nature of AAVE (African American) and SWARE (Alaskan Central Yup'ik). Nonetheless, as expected in a collaborative learning project, the teachers themselves recognized, commented on, and explored their own experiences and understandings of language as a marker of identity and community membership throughout the course, in discussions, course evaluations and projects.

The participants in this study were students in the class, who were all in-service K-12 educators teaching in rural Alaska schools and were pursuing either an MA or PhD. Out of the 22 teachers in the class, all but one were women, ranging in age from early 20s to 60s, 15 were Alaska Native, 10 of which were from SW Alaska. The other participants of the study were the course instructors (authors Marlow and Martelle), who had taught different iterations of the same (or similar) course but were attempting the course redesign described below for the first time. Throughout the rest of the article, the students in the LING 601 class will be referred to as “teachers”, while the course instructors will be referred to as “instructors”.

There were a total of six groups in the class, with three or four teachers in each group. Each group had one PhD student, who acted as a “leader” within the group by organizing group study sessions and coordinating projects and presentations. Each group also had at least one self-identified (from a pre-course questionnaire) SWARE “expert,” who was a source of grammaticality judgments in SWARE. The remaining member(s) may or may not have had some knowledge of SWARE (or another Alaskan rural dialect). These particular group members tended to pose questions to the SWARE expert(s) and assisted in organizing the SWARE data for the group projects.

Throughout the course, there were a total of three group presentations (the first on either Phonetics/Phonology or the Lexicon; the second on Morpho-Syntax; and the final presentation an expansion of the first or the second). Additionally, each presentation was accompanied by a group paper describing and analyzing the linguistic phenomena of SWARE. At the end of the course, each teacher individually wrote a final reflection on learning. The guiding questions for this reflection were “Before

taking this class, I thought language was about ...” and “My own learning ... (using anecdotes to support your discussion, explore what you learned about yourself as a learner through this class).”

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Participatory Teacher Action Research (PTAR)

The overarching methodological framework guiding the ongoing projects and associated longitudinal research described above relied on western and Indigenous theories and methodologies. In order to gain greater understanding of the commonalities and differences across diverse knowledge systems, we utilized a critical participatory action research approach (Herr and Anderson 2005; Kemmis and McTaggart 2007). PTAR, which is based in Action Research (Lewin 1946), is a cyclic inquiry approach that involves planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Herr and Anderson 2005).

PTAR is based on a critical approach to teaching and learning, in which “... people educate each other through the mediation of the world” (Freire 2000: 14). The dialogues between teachers and course instructors were a key component of the course design, which allowed for more opportunities for all participants to learn from each other and be both teachers and learners, rather than the course instructors “transferring” facts and information akin to a banking model. The course instructors were committed to engaging in critical pedagogy:

By critical pedagogy, we refer to the interactive relationship between teaching and learning and theory and practice, called praxis, developed by Freire (2000). This relationship reflects a transformative process that can help us challenge and reflect on our long-held assumptions about what we view as the status quo. Thus, this active, transformative process can help us question our theories about and practices in the world and act on them. (Parker Webster and John 2013: 79)

This is reflected in the goal of the course, which was for the teachers to not only become aware of, but also to question their own beliefs and attitudes, as well as how the education system views language varieties, and the actions this system takes towards the speakers of language varieties. Critical pedagogy and critical PTAR were also inherent in the course design: the course instructors’ and evaluator’s planning sessions spent considerable time reflecting on and questioning how we taught the class before, or how courses like this have been “traditionally” taught. As a result of the course redesign, both teachers and course instructors were active agents in the learning and teaching process.

Both the instructors and students were engaged in Participatory Teacher Action Research (PTAR). Each student utilized PTAR as the research process for their class projects investigating SWARE; and the instructors utilized PTAR to examine the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of developing and implementing the course. Thus, the parallel processes of students' PTAR and instructors' PTAR informed each other through an intersubjective dialectic that afforded opportunities to analyze PTAR at a macro and micro level (Siekmann and Parker Webster 2019). In this way, these parallel processes of research activity allowed for TAR to be utilized as a methodology for teaching and researching through joint collaborative activity (Rogoff et al. 2003).

### 3.2 Data

The data included in this paper were collected over the course of the 2013 Summer Session, an intensive course of study where the K-12 teachers came to Fairbanks and lived on campus for the duration of the classes. The teachers were housed in university housing. They ate and studied together. On weekends, they might go shopping and engage in entertainment activities together. Faculty often socialized with students outside of class. The Alaska Native faculty prepared traditional Native food to help students connect culturally in an urban environment while away from their village communities. There were many opportunities for personal and academic discussions in these various contexts outside of class. This communal approach contributed to a unique cultural space that extended the notion of a collaborative learning community. It also offered a depth of access to participants, which went beyond the university classroom culture.

Data consists of pre-course questionnaires, class field notes, video-recordings of class presentations, formal and informal student interviews, final self-reflections and other student artifacts as well as audio-recorded faculty debriefing sessions (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Timeframe of analyzed data.

| Timeframe                                      | Data collected                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Several weeks before class                     | Pre-course questionnaire items on language beliefs                                                                                    |
| Halfway point of class                         | Midpoint questionnaire items on language beliefs, and reflection of covert and overt prestige                                         |
| Throughout course session                      | Class field notes, video recordings of class presentations, student artifacts, faculty debriefing sessions                            |
| Towards the end of/immediately after the class | Final self-reflection with the prompt “Before taking this class, I thought language was about ...”; post-course reflection interviews |
| Delayed post-course                            | Final master’s projects 2–3 years after course completion                                                                             |

These data were analyzed in terms of trajectories of learning, focusing on three distinct points within this trajectory: pre-course questionnaire; mid-point questionnaire, student artifacts, fieldnotes; and post-course artifacts (e.g., final projects for the master's degree). Because PTAR was also guiding the development of the course, data analysis was ongoing and occurred in regular meetings with instructors and the program evaluator during the course of the class. A final analysis of all data was conducted using discourse analysis techniques (Gee 2010).

In the first phase of analysis, we identified data that would be illustrative of a trajectory of student learning coinciding with key theoretical content presented in the course that involved assignments designed to identify student learning at these points. The key data points are:

1. Pre-course reflection
2. Mid-term reflection assignment, field notes, student artifacts
3. Post-course reflection assignment and interviews

After identifying these data points, each research team member (course instructors and evaluator) individually read and made comments on each assignment. The team then met several times to debrief and discuss their comments and identify and develop thematic trends in the teachers' trajectories of learning.

Pre-course trends:

- comments about “vocabulary” and students’ “limited”, “basic”, vocabulary and need for “interventions” to build a “base language” which underlies the “deficit model” of education

Mid-term trends:

- Movement to recognition that SWARE is a dialect and there are multiple dialects of English—sAE being one
- Developing an understanding that both are valid (sAE and SWARE and SWARE is not “inferior”) and therefore should be honored
- Continuation of the held belief that in order to “succeed” in school and beyond sAE needs to be taught and privileged as the “academic” language of schooling

Post-course trends:

- New recognition of the coexistence of both “dialects” and implications for teaching sAE
- Maintenance of the belief that sAE is still the “dominant” and “privileged” language of success in school and access to future success in life.

These thematic trends representing key points in the trajectory of student learning lead us to Gee's (2010) theoretical framework for discourse analysis, and in

particular, the concept of discourse models, which are fluid and shaped by the cultural groups to which we belong. The trends in trajectories also lead us to view students' ongoing tensions with their long-held belief that sAE is the path to success in schooling and beyond through the lens of Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital.

### 3.3 Gee and discourse models

Using Gee's (2010) framework for discourse analysis, we examined the holistic notion of language that includes not only language-in-use, or discourse, little "d", but also non-language aspects, or Discourse, big "D", which are "gestures, clothes, actions, interactions, symbols, tools, technologies, values, attitudes, beliefs and emotions" (7). These aspects of Discourse allow us to enact specific identities associated with language-in-use.

Within Gee's theory of D/discourse, how we make sense of the world, or how we meaning-make, involves recognizing various patterns that occur in our experiences. These patterns are influenced by the context in which we practice them or in which they are *situated*. Situated meaning contexts are framed in our daily interactions with others. These interactions, which can occur within and across multiple settings, both macro and micro (e.g. classrooms, small discussion groups; lunchroom, dining tables, etc.), are fluid and can draw from a variety of diverse D/discourses. As such, situated meanings are often *assembled* as we actively engage in speaking and listening. According to Gee (2010), situated meanings are often "jerry-rigged on the spot in integral interaction with context" (64). Therefore, because we communicate within and across varied and diverse contexts in our daily interactions, the D/discourse we use is in fluid and in constant flux.

According to Gee (2007), Discourse Models are the largely unconscious theories we hold that help us make sense of texts and the world. They are simplified, often unconscious and taken-for-granted theories about how the world works that we can use in our everyday lives. We learn from experiences we have had, but, these experiences are shaped and normed by the social and cultural groups to which we belong, from which we infer what is 'normal' or 'typical', and we act on these assumptions unless something clearly tells us we are facing an exception to that 'rule'. Discourse models are a tool of inquiry because they mediate between the 'micro' level of interaction and the 'macro' level of institutions. In addition, "(D) ifferent contexts invite different assemblies" (Gee 2010: 64). In some instances, assemblies are routine and automatic because their patterns have been in place over many interactions. In other instances, assemblies require a re-assembly that will accommodate a new or *novel* assembly for new situated meaning contexts. This

process of creating new assemblies contributes to transforming and changing a Discourse model that will explain why and how certain assemblies are related to different contexts. As actors engage in the process of creating novel assemblies, their explanations of the Discourse model may reflect partial and sometimes inconsistent understanding. Changing a formerly held Discourse model can also create tension as actors progress through this transition. This is often the case with graduate students such as those in our study, who are engaged in the assembly process of acquiring new D/discourses associated with academic disciplines, which in turn created new Discourse models.

### 3.4 Bourdieu and cultural capital

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital can exist in three forms: the embodied state in the form of long-lasting dispositions of mind and body; the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods, and the institutionalized state, an objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications. In this section we utilize the form of the embodied state as a framework to examine the relationship between sAE, Yup'ik and SWARE.

For Bourdieu, embodied cultural capital can be consciously acquired or passed down through socialization. Conscious acquisition is achieved through a conscious labor of inculcation and assimilation over time. In contrast, socialization occurs within the family in the form of lived culture and traditions. Linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) is a form of embodied cultural capital that may be consciously acquired or socialized through a lived tradition.

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Pre-course questionnaire

Two Discourse Models emerged in the pre-course questionnaire: deficit and success. As discussed above, semilingualism is a deficit view of language as it locates the source of school underachievement within the child's failure to adequately acquire a language (English or Yup'ik) before coming to school. The success or "getting ahead" model (D'Andrade 1984), which is deeply embedded in US society (Gee 2010), narrowly defines accomplishment in terms of job and/or educational attainment. Standardized American English (sAE) is required to obtain this success and school is designed to prepare one for this success. Together, these two Discourse Models conspire to support one another. If the goal of school is to teach sAE and thereby

prepare students for 'success', then failure to perform in sAE must be explained. One explanation available to educators is that the child is simply not prepared for school because they have "only a rudimentary knowledge" of language in general—a deficit that must be corrected before success can be achieved. This attitude is found across many SW Alaskan communities, as demonstrated by the letters to the editor cited at the beginning of this paper.

The deficit model is shared by many in local k-12 education. In private conversations about challenges faced by a local school district, one district administrator stated "in many cases the biggest challenge is the need to develop a strong first language" for each student. This view was repeated by several incoming teachers in their pre-course questionnaires. The pre-course questionnaire was distributed several weeks before class began and consisted of four parts. In Part 1, teachers were invited to respond to a routine assembly (below) we had heard from teachers and administrators in the region as well as found in the local letters to the editor. To frame their response, teachers were asked to respond explicitly to four discussion questions (also below).

A teacher told me: Most kids coming into our school have only a rudimentary knowledge of English or Yup'ik. Typically the kids who come to kindergarten don't have a lot of vocabulary in either language. But, as we all know, students have to have a strong first language for learning to occur.

1. What do you think this teacher is trying to say? If a teacher said this to you, how would you respond?
2. Do you agree or disagree with this teacher?
3. If you agree ... Is this a good way to put it? Would you put it in another way?
4. If you disagree ... please explain.

In their responses, teachers frequently framed their agreement with the prompt's deficit framing of language skills by repeating or slightly reassembling the wording provided in the questionnaire. Thus we have reference to "rudimentary knowledge of English or Yup'ik", "limited knowledge of both languages" and "limited amount of basic English/Yupik". In the quote below, the prompt's reference to a "strong first language for learning to occur" is reassembled as "a strong foundation of language in English or ... Yup'ik". Both the prompt's phrasing and the reassembly can be seen as a reference to Cummins's (1980) threshold hypothesis and the underlying notion of semilingualism as discussed in the introduction above.

I agree that some students come in with a limited knowledge of both languages, while others come into school with either a strong foundation of language in English or a strong foundation in Yup'ik .... In my experience, I found that when students come into school with only a limited

knowledge of English or Yup'ik that it can take longer for students to learn foundational concepts that are necessary for further learning.

In part 2 of the questionnaire, teachers were invited to reflect on the concept of “Village English”, how they would define it, who uses it and what they would do as teachers if their students used it.

In the response below we see clear reference to the success model in which achievement is directly linked to the acquisition of sAE. While some teachers distance themselves from the judgments being made, saying instead “I have heard”, those they have overheard clearly equate SWARE with an inability to “get a job” or “make it through college” and the necessity to “settle for vocational training”. The acquisition of sAE is seen as the path to economic and academic success. More than this, however, lack of achievement in sAE is equated by these “others” to laziness and taken as a demonstration of an inability to learn thereby linking back to the deficit model discussed above.

... I have heard of some teachers from down states commenting about their students who have never been exposed to Village English or even village life. “They don’t know what ... is!” “They will not make it through college.” “They are lazy.” “They are so and so grades behind!” Most of them include bodily expression of negativity such as shaking their heads, raising their arms, or a big disgusted sigh.

I have heard negative remarks about children and their families regarding how they speak “Village English.” For example, some of the statements I have heard relate to children’s inability to learn, they will not be able to succeed in college – let them settle for vocational training, it is my way or the highway, the children are not smart enough to express what they know, parents do not support the efforts of the school or their children, it is not worth trying when they will not have the desire to learn, etc. I also have heard worse, but choose not to repeat them.

While some teachers distanced themselves from the attitudes and judgments they cited, responses to part 3 of the questionnaire demonstrate that the success model is not something expressed solely by ‘others’.

In part 3, teachers were asked to respond to a quote in which Bill Cosby expresses negative opinions of people who use Ebonics, or African American Vernacular English. In the quote, Mr. Cosby blames “the kid”, “the mother” and “the father” insisting that “[e]verybody knows it’s important to speak English except these knuckleheads”; exclaiming finally “You can’t be a doctor with that crap coming out of your mouth!” The teachers were then asked:

1. Do you share Mr. Cosby’s assessment of Ebonics? Please explain.
2. Have you heard similar opinions describing Village English? Please explain.

Many teachers agreed with Cosby’s overall assessment linking a particular level of success (i.e., attainment of a professional career) with sAE achievement. For

example, in the quotes below the teachers worry that not focusing on sAE will limit “the student’s futures” and prevent them from “attaining professional degrees and positions”

I agree that doctors do not talk like the people he was quoting. If teachers are not intentional about teaching students Standard English, I feel we are limiting the possibilities for the students’ futures.

While I do not agree with the statement that Cosby makes, it sadly holds a small truth. While these common prejudice conceptions permeate our communities, people who do not have a highly developed English proficiency, will struggle to attain professional degrees and positions in mainstream America.

Despite this general agreement, teacher responses were often nuanced, demonstrating the degree to which the success model is in conflict (Gee 2010) with a model of identity in which the language one speaks “is part of who they are”. We see this conflict in the second quote above and the quote below. Above, the teacher agrees with Cosby’s overall assessment but overtly calls out the “prejudice” underlying his position. The teachers note that Ebonics belongs to the community of speakers. It is “their kind of language”, used in “their area” and a “part of who they are”. As such, “we need to accept it.”

Ebonics isn’t “crap” when people are using it in their area. This is how it is spoken and we need to accept it. That is part of who they are. Yes, a doctor may not use it because doctors or people in education have to use Standard English to write their papers or use it in their profession.

Despite this conflict, the success model remains deeply rooted within the broader society and educational system in which Alaska’s schools are embedded. As the above quote demonstrates, Ebonics speakers (and by extension SWARE users) are expected to “use Standard English to write papers or use in their profession”. As one teacher said, sAE will allow a student to become “what they want, given that the person has the right aptitude/training/schooling for their chosen profession.” Similarly, other teachers expect students to “express themselves properly” and gain the “skills they will need in their academic life” since “the person with Standard English would be more likely to get a job” in urban centers outside the community where the way they speak “does not fit” and may carry “a stereotype of how intelligent” they are.

At the end of the questionnaire (part 4), the teachers were asked to tell us what they hoped to get out of the class. In the quote below we hear one teacher asking for quick fixes or “new interventions that are easy to put into any daily routine”. The teacher ties these interventions to the deficit model, saying students need to “gain a strong vocabulary base” in order to “catch up” as “test scores ... have been very low

and ... our students are behind in all areas.” She then expresses frustration at being both a parent and a mother before again invoking the deficit model, saying that other parents need help to “take their role as the first teacher more seriously.”

I am hoping that we will spend time being exposed to new interventions that are easy to put into any daily routine or curriculum. The need for helping students gain a strong vocabulary base is what my students need. My desire to get my masters is to become a better teacher and help my students catch up. Our test scores at our site have been very low and I see that our students are behind in all areas ... Before being a teacher, I am a parent and we all know that a parent is the first teacher. I hope to gain ideas on how to help parents take their role as the first teacher more seriously. The students will be so much more successful with their parents' support.

## 4.2 Midpoint questionnaire

As noted in the introduction, linguistics maintains its own routine assemblies regarding language and dialect; namely, that all language varieties are legitimate, rule-governed, dynamic and rich with patterns and meanings. This counter-Discourse is such a strong “article of faith” within the field of Linguistics (Robins 1989: 3), that most introductory texts address it directly as Robins (1989) does below:

It is a popular assumption on the part of those speaking standard dialects that other dialects, especially those spoken by groups lacking any social prestige or recognition, are both ‘incorrect’ and more or less formless, without a true grammar or precise means of discourse ... Needless to say, the linguist faithful to the principles of objective scientific statements must abjure all such modes of expression and value judgments, aesthetic and quasi-moralistic, as outside his field, though he may take note of them as sociolinguistically relevant ... evidence of part of the social function of language within a community ... (Robins 1989:55)

In designing the pre-course questionnaire and the course itself, we sought to demonstrate that SWARE is as equally complex and rule-governed as sAE and that children are not coming to school under a deficit that must be overcome. Rather, they are entering school with a legitimate variety of English that may be built upon. Throughout the first half of the course, we examined phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns in AAVE through readings (Green 2002) and problem sets as a model for students to explore patterns in SWARE. At the midway point of the summer session, we assigned a written reflection in which the students responded to the following:

- a repeat reflection on Part 3 of the pre-questionnaire (Bill Cosby’s negative comments on “Ebonics” and whether they share his views),
- whether Green (2002) would agree or disagree with Mr. Cosby’s statements
- a reflection on the topics of covert and overt prestige, in response to two separate contexts of dialect use

From this mid-point reflection, we hear teachers reassembling their model of language and dialect. As the quotes below demonstrate, most teachers no longer “share Mr. Cosby’s assessment of Ebonics” and they recognize that AAVE is “a dialect of American English” because it “follows its own lexical rules and patterns”. Even though it “sounds to outsiders as faulty grammar and slang, [it] is actually grammatically correct syntax according to AAE ...”

I do not share Mr. Cosby’s assessment of Ebonics. From Green, we have learned that AAE, a dialect of English, has its own phonological, lexical, and syntactic rules and components. What sounds to outsiders as faulty grammar and slang, is actually grammatically correct syntax according to AAE syntactic components. The components are not accepted as school or professional language. If being a doctor is the goal, AAE speakers can learn to use SAE in order to communicate in that environment. There are many examples of bidialectal (or multidialectal) speakers.

I don’t share Bill Cosby’s negative assessment of Ebonics. To put it simply, Cosby is making the presumption that African American English is not a form of English ... Since AAE has a set of rules and a distinct vocabulary, it is then said to be a dialect of American English ... If people were given opportunities to study and understand the roots of African American English, I think it would be considered a valuable language and resource.

Acknowledging that AAVE is a legitimate, rule-governed, and dynamic variety of English, these same teachers noted that dialects like AAVE and SWARE do not prevent students from learning SAE “[i]f being a doctor is the goal ...” For at least one teacher, her own learning about AAVE has demonstrated that it is “a valuable language and resource.”

While this reassembly of language and dialect directly challenges the deficit model identified in the pre-course questionnaire, it does little to counter the success model. As the teachers above explain, other dialects are still “not accepted as school or professional language” and students must be “willing to learn SAE” if “being a doctor is the goal”. It is important to note here that Green (2002) expresses a similar point, acknowledging that while AAE is rule-governed, speakers are still evaluated by their use of SAE or “mainstream English”.

In no uncertain terms, speakers are evaluated by the language they use. Indeed AAE is rule-governed; however, what is of consequence ... is not that AAE speakers use a variety that is systematic, but that they do not consistently use mainstream English. The message is that the AAE linguistic system has no validity as a legitimate communicative system in a society in which the language of power is mainstream English (Green 2002: 226).

In selecting Green (2002) we explicitly sought to counter the idea that “the problem” faced by schools in Southwestern Alaska is one of insufficient language development (i.e., the deficit model; semilingualism). We did not seek to explicitly challenge the model of success linking educational and career achievement with SAE. Following

Green we acknowledged that this model of success is rooted in the hegemonic power of SAE speakers within mainstream (white) US society. As Green explains the point further below, SAE is the variety used in conducting business because it is the variety used by those in power.

There is nothing inherently superior about mainstream English, but it is required in the workplace because it is the language of the people of power. Those who are in power are in the position to determine which variety of a language will be used in conducting business (Green 2002: 226).

In an attempt to interrogate the hegemony of SAE, we introduced the concepts of overt and covert prestige. In sociolinguistics, overt prestige is tied to mainstream forms of language and behavior associated with the power and status of mainstream institutions. Covert prestige is tied to forms of language and behavior that express solidarity and identity associated with local cultural institutions. In the midpoint questionnaire teachers were invited to review the readings on overt and covert prestige and then respond to the two prompts below in which a young woman seems to accept the “need” to speak SAE while her younger brother appears to reject it.

Now Imagine a young woman growing up in a family that speaks a form of African American English like the one Mr. Cosby objects to. If she adopts school English both inside and outside of the classroom, which form of prestige (overt or covert) is most important to her? Please explain.

Now imagine the young woman ... above has a younger brother. The brother continues to speak AAVE both inside and outside school. His teachers recognize that in many ways he is just as capable as his sibling, and don't understand why they have never been able to teach him Standard English. Which form of prestige is most important to this brother? Please explain.

In reflecting on overt prestige, several white teachers noted that the overt prestige afforded SAE fosters a perception of inequality between dialects, as the school language has “a higher social status than the language used at home.” In the quote below, we see the hegemonic nature of SAE when the teacher notes that even those that do not speak it consider SAE “more proper/formal” than AAVE.

At school, overt prestige is the most important to her. That is what she has chosen as the most important so that is what is choosing to use in her life everywhere. This is overt prestige because the SAE is considered more proper/formal by everyone around her, even though not everyone around her speaks it.

While some teachers cast the reasons for the young woman's shift to SAE as “unknowable” or simply a natural recognition of its higher status by “everyone”, including those who do not speak it, the two teachers below (one Alaska Native and one White) tie SAE directly to the discourse model of success. For these teachers shifting is linked to “going to college” and “finding a job that pays well”. As one

teacher says, “like Green repeatedly pointed out, SAE is [the] language that those in power speak and generally require prospective employees to speak ...”

She probably perceives ‘school English’ as having a higher social status ... She probably feels that to speak SAE, she will be more successful in education and finding a job that pays well.

She might realize that she wants to continue her education by going to college and acknowledges she may want to change her way of speaking if she wants to succeed down that path, because, like Green repeatedly pointed out, SAE is [the] language that those in power speak and generally require prospective employees to speak it as a qualifying factor for the job.

Finally, two Alaska Native teachers related both this sense of inequality and desire to achieve mainstream success to experiences in their own communities. The first teacher explains that “some Yugtun speakers ... see English as a higher or better language that comes with a better lifestyle flowing with money ...” The second teacher explains that, like some in her own community, the young woman may have come to the conclusion “from her observations ...” that sAE would make her “a more valued individual than the people in [her] community”.

To her school English has a higher social status and is possibly seen that way among her peers. By choosing to adopt the school language she is saying that it is better than her own dialect and wants to disconnect from that language ... And just like some Yugtun speakers who see English as a higher or better language that comes with better lifestyle flowing with money, the young girl probably chose school English.

It could be she has her ‘dream’ to become more successful than her parents. She has that drive in her that will help to make her successful when she goes out looking for employment. It could be from her observation how [AAVE] ... speakers are looked at in school and employment settings. So, she opted to become a more valued individual than the people in [her] community. There are ... individuals ... like her ... from my community. They had a better grasp of English than the others in their class. They leave the community and push themselves to become successful.

Reflecting on covert prestige, all these teachers noted that in embracing a local dialect, students may be expressing opposition to the pressure to “identify with SAE” and “fit ... an ‘academic’ setting.” At the same time, these students may value the “solidarity” that comes with a connection with one’s home, community and peers. As one teacher put it, a student who does not embrace sAE may want “... to be part of his community where he is most comfortable ... and where he is most welcome ... to feel ‘he belongs.’”

The idea might mean he wants to be a part of his community where he is most comfortable and wants to belong. It could be because of his friends that speak the same language and where he is most welcome. If he had that drive his sister has to move up a class, he has that capacity ... but he does not want to leave his roots. He might change ... later in life but right now the social group might be important to him to feel ‘he belongs.’

### 4.3 Interviews and final self-reflection

Turning to interviews and written student self-reflections, which took place at the end of the summer session, and final projects, which were submitted at the end of the degree program, we see further evidence of shifting views and re-assembly of discourse models around SWARE. Learning about the structured nature of SWARE allowed many of the teachers to see student language as having status. As one teacher reports in an interview, “some of the things that the students say, ... now I can see a reason for it, how it came to be, and it’s just not them making a mistake.” A second teacher expands on this view:

They have developed a new form of language through Village English. It follows rules and [pause] it really is its own language ... And that’s been good for me because it gives it more status ... So to realize oh, they are following rules, there is a structure that is being followed ... that’s been enlightening for me.

Self-reflections written at the end of the course echoed this linguistic model of local dialects. SWARE ceased being a “sloppy language” and became instead something “that is complex and useful”.

This class has made me more aware of how language is used. When my students use Village English, they are still speaking in a way that is organized and rule based. It isn’t a sloppy language, but one that is complex and useful. I am looking forward to teaching this year with new ears for the type of communication that goes on around me.

As part of her MA thesis investigating the integration of local indigenous knowledges into the classroom, Kealy (2014) reports similar reflections regarding SWARE specifically among non-indigenous teachers enrolled in the class.

some of the things that the students say, ... now I can see a reason for it, how it came to be, and it’s just not them making a mistake. (67)

They have developed a new form of language through Village English. It follows rules and [pause] it really is its own language ... And that’s been good for me because it gives it more status ... So to realize oh, they are following rules, there is a structure that is being followed ... that’s been enlightening for me. (67)

[T]here was a lightbulb that went on when [a classmate] said yesterday in a discussion that if ... a family feels like its culture or language isn’t valued ... and there’s a push for one language over another, a lot of frustration and ... a lack of growth occurs. And when she said that, I could see in the last couple of years, yes it is very true ... because it really does mess [with students’ sense of] cultural identity (68)

Even more importantly, teachers questioned the routinized deficit model promoted and reinforced by “the English proficiency tests” and repeated by “different

teachers” that labeled children “not fluent” or “caught between English and Yup'ik without knowing any language”. Re-assembling the linguistic model of language and dialect, these teachers saw their students as fluent speakers of “a valid dialect of English” and authoritatively rejected the notion their students were semilingual or “handicapped linguistically”.

When I finally understood that VE was a valid dialect of English that my students spoke fluently, I realized that my students were not handicapped linguistically. And that they were not ‘caught between English and Yup'ik without knowing any language,’ as I heard different teachers state sadly.

For example, even though I knew all students come to school with a language, I followed the definition of the English proficiency tests and would present saying that some children came to the school not fluent in Yugtun or English. Now I can back my belief up and use the Green book as a reference. I also learned that my children's African American father has his own dialect and that he is not wrong in his way of speaking.

After an activity ... I heard ... ‘Now I understand why children speak the way they do in the villages.’ I was happy ... I think that was the first time someone didn't state Village English as being negative. Most of the time I hear teachers say, ‘Those kids don't know how to speak English.’

## 5 Discussion

As previously discussed, situated meanings are often assembled “on the spot” and occur within contexts of interacting with other actors. The trajectories of learning for some of the graduate students in the class illustrate how the process of creating novel (or new) assemblies can reflect partial and sometimes inconsistent understanding, particularly when they are trying to grasp a new concept or vocabulary term that seems counter to a formerly held Discourse model. This process of changing formerly held Discourse models can often create tensions as actors, such as the graduate students, progress through this transition.

The overarching tensions that emerged over the course of the summer class involved Discourse models of western schooling policies and practices and the Discourse models students encountered while learning “new” academic disciplinary concepts and vocabulary. These two Discourse models are enacted both explicitly and tacitly through the institution of western schooling and also teachers' lived experiences of teaching and living in rural Alaska. The first is the “deficit model of education”, which was articulated by some teachers in the previous sections as, “students coming to school without any language”. The “deficit model” in education is based on a belief that there is a prescribed “correct” way of performing in school, and anyone who operates outside of that norm is operating at a deficit. They are

perceived to be lacking something that needs to be “fixed” in order to be successful in school and society. This belief, forwarded in the work of Payne (2005) and taken up by others in the late 1990s and early 2000s, has been the topic of critique (see Brannon et al. 2008).

The second Discourse model, also known as the American Discourse model of “success” or “getting ahead”, is deeply ingrained in United States society and its educational system (D’Andrade 1984). The American Discourse model of “success” or “getting ahead” is grounded in the belief that if one has an ability and works hard and has a strong drive to achieve high goals, “one will reach a level of accomplishment” and will “be recognized as a success, which brings prestige and satisfaction” (D’Andrade 1984: 95).

Both Discourse models primarily focus on the individual’s role and responsibility in achieving a level of performance that ultimately conforms to the norms and practices of the dominant culture that will, according to their proponents, afford the student success in school and in life. This focus on the individual’s responsibility for achieving success, which is determined by conformity to the norms of the dominant culture seems related to Bourdieu’s (1977) idea that “the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give” (494). And further, his concept of *cultural capital* seems applicable to the discussion about the relationship of sAE to SWARE and Yup’ik.

In SW Alaska, both Yup’ik and sAE carry cultural capital within their own contexts. Fluency in Yup’ik or having the ability to speak/understand some Yup’ik is cultural capital in embodied state—both in Yup’ik culture, especially in those communities that still have fluent speakers, and within the Indigenous language revitalization and language maintenance movements. As part of such movements in Alaska, many communities seek to teach Yup’ik in schools even if it is as a second language. Speaking Yup’ik is the “ideal” for many communities. Yet, local language shift has resulted in the breakdown of intergenerational language transmission thereby interrupting language learning through socialization and necessitating acquisition through conscious labor. Thus, for many communities, language in an institutionalized (western) setting may be deemed necessary for maintaining Yup’ik language and culture.

Being able to read, write and speak standardized American English also carries cultural capital in the embodied state. As discussed above, sAE is the language of ‘success’ in the U.S. and in SW Alaska, both in terms of job and educational attainment. As such, sAE is the language of instruction in the majority of schools in the U.S. In Alaska, as in much of the U.S., the choice of medium of instruction is up to the local school and/or community. However, and as national educational policy makes clear, regardless of the medium of instruction the school must demonstrate continued success through sAE (Marlow 2004; Wyman et al. 2010). Thus, while there are no explicit

legal restrictions on the medium of instruction and schools may (and do) choose to teach through the media of both Native and foreign languages, all state and federally mandated standardized testing in Alaska currently takes place through SAE.

In Bourdieu's view, the more familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, particularly one's ability to understand and use educated language, the more cultural capital one has. In SW Alaska, a meeting ground for both western and Yup'ik traditions, we find two educated languages: the traditional Yup'ik of elders and the standardized American English of the school system. Both carry cultural capital within their own spheres.

As Bourdieu further explains, the educational system assumes that children come to school already in possession of cultural capital. In the United States, being able to read, write and speak in SAE means one has the linguistic and cultural competence necessary to 'succeed' in both the educational system and in the job market. In SW Alaska, being able to speak and understand Yup'ik means one has the linguistic and cultural competence necessary to participate in local culture, including subsistence and governance (Wyman 2012).

Within this context, speaking SWARE may be seen as lacking one or both of these forms of cultural capital. The following quotes from teachers demonstrate the status of SAE and the lack of status of SWARE in the school setting:

I have heard negative remarks about children and their families regarding how they speak "Village English." For example, some of the statements I have heard relate to children's inability to learn, they will not be able to succeed in college – let them settle for vocational training, it is my way or the highway, the children are not smart enough to express what they know, parents do not support the efforts of the school or their children, it is not worth trying when they will not have the desire to learn, etc. I also have heard worse, but choose not to repeat them.

If all things were equal except the use of standard versus Village English, the person with Standard English would be more likely to get a job in a non-native community.

I have heard concern expressed over the students' ability to communicate in the "outside" world. "How will they get a job talking like that?" "Will they be made fun of?"

As the above quotes demonstrate, the two discourses, rudimentary knowledge and success, conspire to delegitimize SWARE and locate the source of school underachievement within the child rather than within the broader sociopolitical context of school and schooling. As Bourdieu (1977) explains:

By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture (Bourdieu 1977: 494).

We recognize that Big-D Discourses are never simply good or bad. The question must always be who benefits and who is negatively affected by a particular instantiation of a Discourse.

## 6 Conclusion

The course was rooted in a structural model of linguistics. As such, the course content and projects focused on recognizing and analyzing the internal structure and regularity of SWARE. A goal of the course was to raise teacher awareness of, and begin to question their own beliefs and attitudes about language varieties. Critical pedagogy and PTAR were inherent in the course design. Teachers and course instructors were active agents in parallel processes of research. Because “action” is the goal of doing PTAR, the development of an action plan that includes strategies for implementing the analysis of data and results of the PTAR project. Based on findings, the following strategies are being investigated for future course content.

The first strategy involves the connections between language and race, and raciolinguistic approaches to language and education, as discussed in Flores and Rosa (2015). While the course was not designed to explicitly address race, we chose the structural linguistics textbook centered on AAVE to create the conditions for conversations about race to emerge. The topic of race did in fact come up in several conversations throughout the course (although among some teachers and not others). Using racialization as a lens to explicitly introduce the topic of race and language in future course iterations could open up more opportunities for teachers to make new theoretical connections to apply to their practice in the classroom.

The second strategy is to explore the appropriateness of additive models of language education in the complex linguistic ecologies of Southwestern Alaska. As Flores and Rosa (2015) point out, American schooling maintains a monoglossic language ideological discourse, which prioritizes the white listening subject. While the course described here challenged a monolithic view of English as a single legitimate variety, it did not attempt to address questions of context of use or appropriateness. Nonetheless, the teachers themselves expressed the view that SWARE reflects community identity while sAE is the language of school and work. Observing this, future course development should address the use of not only varieties of English, but also Indigenous languages in the complex linguistic ecologies that exist in the teachers’ communities.

Throughout the course and throughout the program, teachers followed independent learning trajectories and developed different insights to the theoretical concepts presented in class, some of which were not explicitly taught, such as

connections to race. We relate this process of learning to the Yup'ik concept of *ellangluni*, 'becoming aware'. As Angaiak-Bond (2010: 2) explains,

Becoming aware, *ellangluni*, can be defined as gaining an enlightened understanding of why and how things are or are not. To become aware is to have an 'ah-ha!' moment to make a connection and see things in a new way. These moments allow individuals to make positive changes in their lives to become better people. In my case, I was becoming aware as a parent, schoolteacher, and a community member.

For me, becoming aware was a gradual process that only kept heightening with the literature I read and what I heard ...

In our view, the ontological and epistemological foundation for the development of the course (and program development) lies in the Yup'ik concept of *ellangluni*, 'becoming aware'. We see the above strategies as starting points to the development of the action plan for future course designs. *Ellangluni*, like PTAR, is a gradual, ever evolving learning process.

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