

PLATO Philosophy Fund Application

Project Title: Linguistic Inquiry with Bilingual Children

Dates for Project: September 4 2017–August 17, 2018

Amount of Funding Requested: \$4,997

I. Please describe the project, including any work that has already been done to develop it. (500 words max)

This project proposes to create and pilot a two-week curriculum for developing communities of linguistic inquiry in elementary schools. The curriculum will be designed for integration in the English Language Arts portion of the New York State fourth and fifth grade curricula. The project idea emerged from a collaboration between co-PIs Frances Blanchette and Glenda Francis, formerly fourth and fifth grade teaching partners at a dual language school in Brooklyn. Blanchette, now a linguist, and Francis, now a mathematics teaching coach and consultant in New York City, have demonstrated success in developing communities of mathematical inquiry with elementary school students and teachers. (See [1] for a description of this work, including transcripts of student-centered classroom dialog.) With this project, we aim to integrate the methodologies employed in those communities to cultivate a philosophical approach to language learning in mainstream classrooms.

A previous project in Ginsberg et al. [2] lays some groundwork for our proposal. Ginsberg et al. guided high school students learning English as a second language through a series of inquiries exploring their home languages. Inquiries based on student need and interest focused on linguistic topics such as noun phrase pluralization. The authors found that this work “captures students’ interest and engages them in critical inquiry about the nature of linguistic knowledge and their beliefs about language” (p. 249). This project extends this model to mainstream fourth and fifth grade dual-language classrooms, and integrates social aspects of language knowledge that raise questions of fairness and justice central to moral development.

One investigation will focus on natural language negation. Consider (1):

(1) I didn’t eat nothing.

This sentence has two possible meanings, one in which the two syntactic negations (*n’t* and *nothing*) contribute a single semantic one (i.e., ‘I didn’t eat anything’), and another in which the two negations cancel each other (i.e., ‘I ate something’). These meanings are common to all human languages, and form part of all speakers’ linguistic knowledge. Fourth and fifth graders therefore know them, and are likely familiar with the social contexts that favor one over the other. Our curriculum will bring this knowledge to their consciousness and guide them in reflecting on it through classroom dialog.

We begin by asking students to observe sentences like (1), and to collectively define negation (e.g. “words like *didn’t* and *nothing* that mean something is not true”). Students will then reflect on the meanings of the sentence, and work collaboratively to find examples of negation in

texts such as “No Speak English” from Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*. Students will present their findings to the class, and discuss how they relate to the two meanings of (1). Adding the social and ethical component, students will reflect on whether they have ever heard anyone be corrected on their use of negation, and characterize the social contexts in which each use might be favored. Lastly, students will debate the fairness of constraining people’s language use, and formulate arguments for or against such social constraints.

References

- [1] Cameron, Antonia, Frances Blanchette, Glenda Francis, Christina Fuentes, and Mayra Rivera-Deliz. 2012. The role of communities of practice in developing teacher leadership. *The NCTM Yearbook of Professional Learning Communities*. Reston, VA: NCTM.
- [2] Ginsberg, D., M. Honda, & W. O’Neil. 2011. Looking beyond English: Linguistic Inquiry for English Language Learners. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 5: 249–264.

2. What is the purpose of this project? (500 words max)

The purpose of this project is to explore how philosophical inquiry can be integrated into the English Language Arts curriculum of mainstream elementary dual-language classrooms, and to begin to assess the utility and viability of such a model. Philosophers and linguists have long been interested in what it means to know a language, and there is general consensus that the answer is elusive and complex [2]. Nevertheless, the Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) Standards [3] consistently reference “knowledge of language” (from p. 25), and require that students use this “knowledge” in performing various literacy related tasks. They further require that students recognize social variation in language use, and fine-tune their own language according to social conventions (p. 30). Given the complexity of language and its social uses, these are challenging standards to meet. In our experience working in New York City public schools, we have found that existing curricula provide limited support in guiding teachers and students toward meeting these standards. Our project uses the tools of philosophical inquiry to help students meet and exceed these standards, develop their own philosophical stances about language use, and become critical consumers of texts.

Concurrent with the linguistic demands put forth in the Common Core, public schools students are becoming increasingly linguistically diverse. In the 2013–2014 academic year, approximately 4.5 million U.S. public school students were classified as “English Language Learners” [1]. This exponential growth of the bilingual population is coupled with pervasive anti-immigrant sentiment reflected in English-only policies, and ill-prepared school systems. As a result, bilingual students have low standardized test scores and high dropout rates [1], and bilingualism is seen as a deficit. Our project also aims to address these issues in applying the tools of critical inquiry to empower students to recognize and confront the negative effects of institutionalized language discrimination.

As described in 1, the inquiries in this project begin by asking students to examine and reflect on their own knowledge of specific linguistic structures (e.g. negative sentences). Students are then guided toward making a connection to literacy, observing the various ways in which these structures appear in texts, and reflecting on the assumptions that the author might be making about

language. Through this work, students develop a language stance that serves to deepen their own comprehension of the text, and empower them to take on the assumptions about language use that the author might be making. Students can use this newly formed philosophical stance about language to inform other texts they read, and to develop their own sense of advocacy regarding language use. This inquiry based approach affords opportunities for high levels of student engagement. As byproducts of this engagement, students will arrive at a deep understanding of the linguistic structures under investigation and the social conventions that constrain their use, thereby exceeding the expectations of the Common Core. By virtue of cultivating their own philosophical stances regarding language and language use, students are supported in becoming critical consumers of texts, and are empowered as learners.

References

- [1] Callahan, R. 2013. *The English learner dropout dilemma: Multiple risks and multiple resources*. Santa Barbara, CA: California Dropout Research Project.
- [2] Chomsky, N. 1986. *Knowledge of Language*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- [3] National Governors Association for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. 2010. *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Washington D.C.: National Governors Association for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers.

3. Who will benefit from the project, and how? (500 words max)

As described in 2, our expectation is that students will benefit in numerous ways, both in the development of their literacy skills and application of language conventions, and in their ability to think critically and apply their philosophical stances about language use to new texts and real life contexts. In addition to this student growth, we also expect that teachers will benefit from this project. The two week curriculum we propose to create, pilot, and refine, represents a concrete tool that teachers can use to support students' language development and awareness as well as their literacy skills. Through this process, we expect that teachers will see how they can support students in becoming aware of their own thinking and their own stance relative to language use and related issues. In helping students become aware of any views that they may be subconsciously developing about language, teachers may also become more aware of their own views about language and language use, and begin to formulate and adjust their own philosophical stances about language and language education.

Our curriculum will also provide a model for how to integrate inquiry based methods into core areas of the curriculum in a way that directly addresses the Common Core Standards. In applying this curriculum, we expect that teachers will begin to see the value of inquiry, and how it can support analytical reasoning and argumentation, and will be inspired to integrate inquiry based approaches not only in language studies but across other content areas. Inquiry based approaches provide a model for thinking, and for what it means to think. In implementing this curriculum, teachers will therefore be empowered with tools to help support students in developing their thinking across the content areas.

In addition to teachers and students, we expect that this curriculum can also benefit administrators at the school and district level. Administrators need to be able to evaluate the

efficacy of Language Arts and other curricula, and make informed decisions about what to purchase and implement. Our curriculum can serve as a metric for determining the extent to which a Language Arts program not only meets but exceeds the Common Core, while maintaining a clear focus on language study and the development of critical thinking.

4. What is the plan for developing and implementing the project? Include a timeline.

PROJECTED DATE	PLAN OF ACTION, TASKS, AND ACTIVITIES
Fall 2017 – Winter 2018	Development of Pilot Language Curriculum and Partnership Alliance with dual language school community
May 14 – 25, 2018	Classroom implementation of the Pilot Language Curriculum in a bilingual, dual language Grade 4 or 5 elementary classroom
May 28 – June 1, 2018	Conduct 1:1 Clinical Post-Study Interview with select subjects
June 4 – 22, 2018	Review and Revision of Pilot Curriculum
June 25 – August 17, 2018	Archiving and Publication of Findings

5. What other funding sources have you explored for this project?

This proposal represents our first attempt at pursuing funds for this project.



6. Please list your budget, including any amounts from other sources.

PERSONNEL	DUTIES & TASKS		SALARY
1 Principal Consultant: Glenda Francis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Research, Curriculum Development, and Publication - Outreach and Liaison with School - Facilitation and instruction of Curriculum 		\$4,650.00 (About 120 hours over 2 months)
MATERIALS	QUANTITY	PRICE PER UNIT	PROJECTED EXPENSE
House on Mango Street, Sandra Cisneros	25	\$5.00	\$125.00
100-Sheet Classic Black & White Composition Notebook	25	\$2.00	\$50.00
2-Pocket Folders with Fasteners	Box of 25	\$10.00	\$10.00
Ruled Chart Tablet 24" x 32"	2 Tablet of 25 Sheets	\$8.00	\$16.00
Crayola Markers	Pack of 10	\$5.00	\$5.00
Dry Erase Markers	Pack of 8 Chisel Tip	\$14.00	\$14.00
Epson 127/126 Black and Color High Yield Ink Cartridges	1 Combo Pack	\$74.00	\$74.00
30% Recycled Copy Paper, 8.5 x 11, White	Ream of 500	\$8.00	\$8.00
Color Laser Printing, Binding of Curriculum	2	\$45.00	\$45.00
TOTAL PROJECTED EXPENSES			\$4,997.00