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TEACHING LINGUISTICS

‘Language in the United States’: An innovative learner-centered, asynchronous general-education course in linguistics

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LIN 200 ‘Language in the United States’ is a large general-education course dealing with linguistic diversity in the United States. It is taught online in an asynchronous format and attracts hundreds of students each semester. The pedagogical innovations adopted in this course include the use of guest lectures by leading experts in the field, the design of discussion board activities to facilitate interaction among students and with instructors, and the organization of the material into adaptable learning modules. We adopt a learner-centered approach using the backward-design framework and applying the community-of-inquiry model. The result is a course that succeeds in achieving its main learning goals: to introduce students to the vast linguistic diversity in the United States and to the basic principles of linguistics, in particular, that human language is primarily spoken or signed (not written), that every human group has its own language, and that all languages are equally capable of expressing any human thought or emotion, although their social prestige may differ.*

Keywords: asynchronous online course, sociolinguistics, language diversity in the US, general education, modules, discussion board, community of inquiry

1. INTRODUCTION. This article presents a series of pedagogical innovations that have brought a large general-education course on linguistic diversity from an in-person delivery into the digital world. Our course, LIN 200 ‘Language in the United States’ (henceforth Language in the US), has two overarching learning goals. The learning goal that drives every module of the course is that students come to understand the great diversity of language and languages in the United States. Most students who take the course have little to no background in linguistics. Almost all students enter with the preconceived belief that the United States is a monolingual English-speaking country. Many even believe that English is the official national language. This course is designed to dispel these beliefs and to teach students that the United States has no official language and that it is, in fact, quite linguistically diverse, both historically and currently.

* We would like to thank audiences at the 10th Annual Teaching and Learning Colloquium at Stony Brook University (2019) and the LSA’s 94th annual meeting in New Orleans (2020) for their comments and questions on this work. We would also like to thank our anonymous Language referees, editors Andries Coetzee and Shelome Gooden, and associate editors Michal Temkin Martinez and Kazuko Himatsu for their careful feedback on the manuscript. We thank and acknowledge Yang Liu, who assisted with some video editing and content creation, as well as the graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants who helped us to improve the course over the years.
The other major learning goal is to instill in our students the basic principles of linguistics. Among the fundamental ideas of modern linguistics, one is especially important to our course: human language is primarily spoken or signed. For many centuries, studying a language meant studying a written language. Thus, languages with long written traditions (e.g. Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Sanskrit) were the focus of much attention. Throughout history, however, most peoples have not had a written language, but everyone has a spoken or signed language, and the sound systems and grammars of these languages can be described like any written language. This has led to the realization that all languages are structurally equal, even when their attributed social prestige in a community might be different.

If all humans are equal in their biology, it follows quite directly that all human languages are equal in their structure. No one has been able to prove that any one way of speaking or signing is intrinsically better or more advanced than any other. Language in the US is devoted to a broad and deep exploration of the equality of all human ways of speaking and signing, with examples drawn from the United States of America.

The equality of all languages is not a new idea, but it is a fundamental tenet of our field. Our course puts this idea at its center and explores it in an online format through a series of pedagogical innovations, including guest lectures by leading experts in the field, dynamic discussion boards for small groups, and a modular structure that gives the course a flexible format adaptable for different academic term lengths.

Before delving into the design decisions that were made to successfully convert a large in-person course into an equally valuable online version, it is important that we outline the broader goals and the pedagogical background of our course, as well as the roles of the different members of the instructional team. This is addressed in §2. Section 3 presents a detailed discussion of the pedagogical innovations we implemented. As the course aims to ensure that our students develop a strong awareness of the cultural history and social situation of the languages and varieties that coexist in the United States, the content is organized thematically around invited lectures recorded and produced by the Language in the US project team. Content is presented via a module-based structure designed for the course, which includes a discussion activity that allows our students to actively engage with their peers. The article additionally reports on a student-centered quality assessment and some additional data as evidence of the effectiveness of the course.

2. Course background. Language in the US is a general-education course taught every semester at Stony Brook University, a large state university in New York. In 2017, we obtained university funding to convert this large in-person general-education course into an innovative online version. The funding was provided by the Stony Brook University Online Initiative (SBold), a SUNY Open Educational Resources Initiative grant, and the Department of Linguistics. After several hybrid iterations, we have offered the course fully online in an asynchronous format since its planned Spring 2020 launch (that is, prior to the pandemic lockdown), with registration of up to 417 students (in Fall 2021). The course is offered through the university’s learning management system (LMS).

Introductory linguistics classes should not only consist of information and data that are given to students, but also take into consideration students’ real-world experiences with language in order to create a community of inquiry and build on those lived experiences. This is especially true for large courses geared toward nonmajors and classes
dealing with social aspects of language. For this reason, Language in the US has aimed, since its inception, to develop both skills and content knowledge in our students, leveraging their own experiences and interactions with their peers. The following are the learning outcomes for the course.

(1) We aim to foster the following skills:
   a. Evaluate, discuss, and formulate an informed opinion, individually or in groups.
   b. Develop a strong awareness of the cultural history and social situation of the languages and varieties in the United States.
   c. Communicate one’s knowledge and viewpoints on aspects of the languages in the United States and their linguistic and social characteristics.
   d. Study the structure and findings of academic literature regarding the situation of the languages in the United States.

(2) We expect that students will learn to:
   a. Analyze the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of the languages that coexist in the United States territory.
   b. Examine historical, educational, and political factors influencing the current status of the English language and its varieties in the United States.
   c. Explore the future of linguistic communities in American society.

This section presents an overview of the course’s design. We clarify the core pedagogical aims and how they influenced the design of the online version of the course. In doing so, we also depict the instructional team’s fundamental role in enhancing students’ educational experience.

2.1. INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN. In developing Language in the US, we applied the process of UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN, also known as BACKWARD DESIGN (Wiggins & McTighe 2005, Richards 2013). When designing a course, instructors traditionally have thought first about how to teach the content and envision different learning techniques, then they develop assessments of the learning process, and finally they establish the connections between the content and how it is taught and the learning goals of the course. This approach is called FORWARD DESIGN. Following the backward-design framework, we first were very intentional about establishing the learning goals of our course, then we considered how we would assess student progress and achievement of the learning goals, and finally we made decisions about how to teach the content.

We applied this approach in the design both of the course and of each collection of content that we call LEARNING MODULES, each of which addresses one topic in our curriculum. When designing a module, we begin the process by creating specific measurable course-level outcomes (in a regular semester, these are weekly outcomes). We then adapt the assessment tools already introduced in other modules to directly measure progress in student learning toward those outcomes. Last, we plan the learning activities we will bring into the class in order to build student competency. The learning activities engage students in the development of their own skills and knowledge either passively (e.g. video watching, reading) or actively (e.g. practice quizzes, online discussion), so they can achieve the planned learning outcomes.

In this way, the design of our course is truly learner-centered, as ‘knowledge is constructed by the activities of the learner’ (Biggs 2014:9) rather than merely transmitted from the instructor to the student. This CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT (Biggs 1996, 2014) of the learning goals, the assessment, and the learning activities is doubly secured in our
course: not only are all elements of the course clearly communicated to the students in advance (see §3.3), but learning also takes place based on what the student does, not what the instructor does (Tyler 1949).

The overarching critique of online learning is the lack of engagement required from students and the instructional team alike. An asynchronous course in its essence means that everyone maintains their own schedule, which oftentimes leads to a disconnect with the material or varied levels of participation. In a synchronous environment, hands can be raised and a casual pre- or postlecture conversation with peers and instructors may alleviate any minor doubts or spark a meaningful discussion. But in asynchronous courses the lack of relationship building between the instructor and students through lectures may cause some insecurities for students regarding one-on-one communication in office hours, leading them to opt to suffer in silence rather than voice their confusions. The typical in-person routes of communication must find asynchronous alternatives.

To avoid these shortcomings, we focused on creating a course that offers learners versatility in how and when they interact with the material, without sacrificing the overall level of engagement. As a framework to support the online learning activities of Language in the US, we applied the community-of-inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2000, 2010) to encourage student interaction and engagement. Accordingly, the course was created around three elements of an educational experience, which we built into the learning activities: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2010, Casey & Kroth 2013).

Teaching presence is centered around the role of the main instructor and the teaching assistants (TAs) and focuses on showing that the instructional team is engaged in their field, responsive to student needs, and communicating well with the students. Social presence consists of student-to-student interaction and cooperation in learning new concepts; this can be done in a variety of ways but is centered around student-to-student communication. Cognitive presence is achieved when students are able to create meaning from shared discourse and experience with other students. The educational experience takes place as a result of the constructive alignment of the three presences, when students are guided by the instructor and their peers to engage with the content and build new meaning and relationships. Figure 1 shows how the elements of an educational experience relate to one another in the community-of-inquiry framework.

As an example of how the community-of-inquiry framework is applied in Language in the US, consider the discussion activity for each module (more on discussions and modules is given in §3.2 and §3.3, respectively). As part of teaching presence, instructors and TAs share with the students the learning outcomes of the week, the setting of the activity, the organization and roles of the students in small groups, and the rubric that will be used to assess the activity. In addition, they keep an open line of timely and efficient communication with the students and engage with them on a regular basis. Social presence is created in the small discussion groups, where students have the opportunity to interact with their peers by commenting on and discussing others’ opinions, and clarifying their own ideas about the topic of the week. The small-group approach together with the constant engagement of the instructional team has been demonstrated to improve social and teaching presence in online courses by replicating the personal feel of face-to-face instruction (Borup, West, & Graham 2012). Cognitive presence is achieved when students are able to confirm or reassess their own
learning of the topic, while creating connections to their prior learning, applying the content to new situations, expanding their knowledge, and thus achieving the learning goals of the week. To take control of the educational experience, we take advantage of the features the LMS provides—in particular, a function that allows the instructional team to divide the students into groups and host small-group discussions, and a function that contains and makes explicit the interactions within the small groups and their unique assignments, and makes it possible for the instructional team to easily find students in a large class. On their end, students in small groups are able to engage with a manageable number of peers instead of being involved in a large discussion with 200+ students.

As instructional design is an iterative process where we are constantly revising, reviewing, and rebuilding courses, we are aware that Language in the US is a living object. Each experience is learned from and used to bolster the next iteration of the course, which leads to continuous improvement. The design process is informed by best practices, continuous review, student feedback in each course offering, and fresh ideas brought by new Language in the US project team members (Jonassen 2008). This generates a cycle in which a course iteration is evaluated with regard to the experiences of the instructional team, which are necessarily complemented by the experiences of the students (in terms of achievement of learning goals, level of satisfaction with the course, and assessment results). The instructional team then finds creative ways to fill the gaps in the educational experience and tests new ideas by implementing them in the next course offering. Figure 2 represents this cycle.

Through the design process for Language in the US, as members of the instructional team we are not only building new learning activities and pedagogical experiences,
but also addressing our own biases and beliefs, and dealing with constraints regarding technology or instructional practice. This cycle continuously generates data that we use to propose improvements and changes.

2.2. Organization of the instructional team. Language in the US has adopted a hierarchy of communication between students and the instructional team that begins with peers and works its way up to the primary instructor. The students’ first line of contact is the undergraduate TAs. Due to the considerable number of students enrolled in the course (377 for Fall 2022), undergraduate TAs play a significant role in student engagement. Not only do they answer student questions and monitor participation, addressing teaching presence, but they also make possible and assist with student-to-student interactions, which enriches social presence. The undergraduate TAs are one of the many factors introduced in our course that allows for increased teaching presence and, therefore, improved engagement and experience (Fan et al. 2021).

Since all undergraduate TAs have already taken the course, they are familiar with the content. In preparation for their new role, they meet with the faculty member and graduate student TAs before the start of the semester, and then weekly during the semester, to discuss the types of issues they should be aware of (e.g. inappropriate content, possible plagiarized wording, lack of engagement with the material, etc.). The undergraduate TAs form a close bond with the rest of the instructional team so that they feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that may arise in their interactions with the enrolled students. The mentoring relationship that develops between the graduate TAs/faculty member and the undergraduate TAs often continues long after the course has ended.

Undergraduate TAs also played a special role in the first stages of the online course development. The initial group was chosen from a pool of students who had taken the in-person version of the course successfully, so they were able to evaluate the efficacy of the course conversion into an online format. We valued their comments on how the experience of taking the course in person differs from that of taking it online, and we
paid attention to any of their thoughts or concerns about whether the online format created any benefits or problems from the student point of view. Undergraduate TAs also checked the bank of test questions to make sure that the questions were comprehensive and clear.

The instructional team also includes graduate TAs, who are in an auxiliary position to the main instructor, with their primary role being to lighten the instructor’s workload. This involves assisting students with their questions, holding office hours, and being an intermediary figure between students and the instructor. Graduate TAs also contribute to grading discussion board posts, a task that is generally equally distributed between the main instructor and the graduate TAs. Moreover, they help solve any technical problems that may arise with the use of the learning platform and assist with the general management and set-up of the course.

As noted above, all members of the instructional team meet before the start of the semester and then weekly during the semester to discuss course management and content issues. The graduate student TAs may also work with the faculty member in updating and revising the content and presentation of the modules, which often results in new research initiatives and collaborations.

Undergraduate and graduate TAs’ satisfaction in their roles was examined via a post-course survey in Fall 2021. All of the TAs surveyed expressed a high level of satisfaction with their experience. In addition to getting an inside view of teaching and course preparation and a deeper understanding of the course material, the undergraduate TAs particularly appreciated a number of additional benefits. Among them were improved communication skills and professionalism in dealing with students, learning to manage their time properly, increased understanding of the importance of the team of colleagues, and the sense of satisfaction gained from being able to mentor and help other students.

Finally, the main instructor is the official face of the course and, as a faculty member, the authority in terms of content and course delivery. In addition to sharing the workload of graduate TAs, the main instructor sends official announcements to students, keeps them informed of deadlines, and clarifies questions on the topic of the week and other issues as needed. They additionally have an administrative role that includes writing the syllabus, deciding which modules to include in the course and in what sequence, arranging alternative times for tests with students, and deciding all fine-grained technical details of the course.

During the early first stages, potential main instructors played a role in the design and development of Language in the US as an online course. They created the project, took the lead with the first blueprints of the course, and procured university funding for the project’s different phases. This funding covered expenses for purchasing equipment (hardware and software for recording and working with the materials), traveling to meet with the invited experts and to record their contributions, and compensating graduate and undergraduate assistants for performing tasks such as video editing and subtitling material.

To summarize, the creation, teaching, and success of our online course require a team consisting of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students, and each group plays an essential role in the project.

3. Course model. With an understanding of the general goals and organization of Language in the US, we can now move to a detailed discussion of the pedagogical innovations that constitute our course model. We understand pedagogical innovation
to be the application of novel methods to solve problems and improve instruction and learning. During the first years of our project, the course model was innovative in two aspects. First, the course coupled traditional yet socially relevant linguistic content with the technology of an LMS to impart instruction online. Of course, the pandemic lockdown of 2020 and the ensuing large-scale shift to online learning made this aspect less novel.

Second, the backward-design framework for our course (as explained in §2.1) created opportunities for original approaches to course design. Thus, when establishing the learning goals, we decided to center the learning on guest lectures; when considering how we would assess progress, we included dynamic discussions as assessment tools; and when planning how to teach the content, we decided to organize the learning activities in a module-based structure. As this second aspect of our pedagogical innovation is still relevant, we focus on the three original approaches in this section. We also offer a brief accounting of the data we have collected as evidence of the effectiveness of our course.

3.1. Invited lectures. In the context of our course, an invited lecture is an approximately fifteen-minute video in which an invited expert presents and discusses the topic of the week. In the initial stages of the project, we decided that invited lectures would be a core component for meeting the learning goals of the course. Thus, once we had a preliminary syllabus for Language in the US with a broad outline of target topics and subtopics, we scouted the field for potential lecturers. Along with the invited lectures, course content is presented in other materials and formats, including self-assessment and peer discussion, all of which together form a learning module (§3.3).

Invited experts were asked to cover both fundamental, established knowledge on the topic of interest and snippets of state-of-the-art issues, often involving their own research. Depending on individual preferences, we would provide a list of specific questions to discuss, general guidelines about the topic we would like the lecturer to focus on, or even an indication of a few issues we would like to see addressed. For example, in preparing the module on New York City English, we asked the invited expert to discuss two of the most well-known features of this variety, namely r-lessness and the coffee vowel; at the same time, we gave them free range to approach the topic from whatever direction they saw fit.

Lecture recording took the form of rather informal conversations between one of the project team members and the invited expert. This allowed for videos that feel less like frontal lectures, and often led to unexpected tangents that ended up becoming their own submodules in the course design.

The biggest challenge was streamlining and reducing the content post-recording. While each interview had its own structure, we wanted videos to have a consistent internal organization across lectures to help students in approaching the materials and learning the content (Wiggins & McTighe 2005, Biggs 2014). Each video was cut from an hour of content to approximately fifteen minutes in the final version, because long uninterrupted video expositions negatively affect a student’s ability to retain content (Gobet 2005, Borup, West, & Graham 2012).

The content of the shortened video was then organized in thematically self-contained chunks. At the beginning of each video, students are presented with a table of contents illustrating the organization of the lecture, thus providing them with a structure through which to approach the audiovisual content. An example is shown in Figure 3.
All invited lecture videos were captioned using automatic caption generation along with manual annotation/error correction. Captions were also compiled into text transcripts that were shared with the students as an element in the module. These transcripts served as the textbook for the course, thereby reducing the amount of money students had to spend on additional purchases.¹

To take full advantage of the visual medium, the interviews were enriched with images, graphics, external videos, links to additional resources, and so forth. Video annotations allowed us to creatively highlight the content presented, creating multimedia presentations that build on what a speaker is presenting by adding visual examples, hyperlinks to additional content, and dynamic references. Thus, if an invited expert mentioned a specific book or provided an example analyzing a sentence, we added an image of that book, or the sentence would appear on video next to them. In a lecture about vowel shifts, for example, a graphic would appear next to the lecturer, showing an IPA vowel chart incrementally annotated with arrows illustrating the direction of the vowel shift. Additionally, keywords would appear on videos to highlight important concepts that we wanted to draw students’ attention to. An example of this is shown in Figure 4. In this way, recorded lectures, often perceived as a downside of online education, instead become a perk.

It is important to acknowledge that recording and editing high-quality video lectures was a labor-intensive effort. Particularly in the early stages of the project, on top of recording time and editing, the whole group devoted significant time to walking through drafts of annotated lectures and discussing details of editing and annotation decisions. We used the funding from the SBold grant to cover two semesters of stipend for a graduate research assistant who had video-editing expertise. We used the rest of the funding to purchase recording equipment and to cover travel costs for interviews. Faculty involved in the project contributed their time without compensation. Once a pipeline for the recordings was in place and a majority of the lectures had been recorded and annotated, the Department of Linguistics at Stony Brook University also supported the

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¹ The last textbook used in this course was Tamasi & Anticeau 2014, and the paperback version cost $67.94.
project by assigning additional graduate TAs to the course, with a focus on course development. Course development likely would have been significantly slower (if possible at all) without access to these varied sources of funding.

Additionally, we acknowledge that our invited lectures were possible due to our privilege of having access to an extensive network of colleagues. This may not be possible for other teaching teams, in which case this innovation may not be easily replicated. Our two other innovations, in contrast, do not depend on access to other members in the field and thus may be more easily adopted and adapted by any institution.

3.2. Discussion boards. Along with individual exams, we decided to include online discussion boards as a tool to assess student progress in achieving the learning goals of the course. Discussion boards also provide an opportunity to implement the desired student-centered, collaborative learning necessary to create social presence in the community-of-inquiry framework (see §2.1).

Educational research suggests that an online discussion board is a useful pedagogical supplement to an in-person class as it ‘(1) increases the opportunities for student participation; and (2) enhances the participation of students who may feel more inhibited to engage in discussions in a traditional classroom setting’ (Dengler 2008:481). The same arguments still hold for a fully online class such as Language in the US.

While in an in-person class the instructor may ask students questions during the lecture, solicit responses, and facilitate in-class discussions, things are different in an online class. Online class participants are instead encouraged to interact with their peers through discussion boards and to use these discussions as learning environments, which they do by evaluating questions and gathering information as a group, as well as developing responses and replying to peers (Aragon 2003). The student-to-student aspect of social presence helps to drive the educational experience in our course by providing students an opportunity to organize and present their own opinions as well as to exchange perspectives on a topic. Students also share their own experiences around language, which allows emotion, value, and personal connection to take place in the course while establishing social presence in these discussions (Rourke et al. 2001, Whiteside 2015).
Managing discussion boards in a large asynchronous class, however, presents some unique challenges. With just a handful of students in an online course, it might be possible to request equal participation from every participant in an online discussion. But this approach does not work for a large class. When an instructor poses a question in a class of several hundred students and requires each of them to answer it on the discussion board, several problems arise. Consider the following two. First, it requires the instructor and the TAs to constantly be evaluating several hundred essay-type responses, thus creating challenges for fair grading. It also imposes unrealistic expectations on the students in expecting them to create a short essay-type response for each of the questions. Second, student interactions in each discussion become very limited—the majority of student responses get very few, if any, comments, even if each student is required to comment on some response.

Our goal for Language in the US was, then, to create an online asynchronous process that would mimic the in-class student-to-student debate, supporting the element of social presence in our pedagogical framework and making it manageable to assess the discussion’s results and student participation. Accordingly, we planned for some students to express their opinion and lead the discussion around the instructor’s prompt, while others would give their comments on those responses, either agreeing with them and providing additional evidence from their personal experience or data, or disagreeing with them and providing counterevidence. To accomplish our goal, we designed a system that relies on the LMS’s discussion board function.

Small groups and roles to promote interaction. At the beginning of the semester, students are randomly divided into small groups. The number of students in each group matches the number of discussion topics planned by the instructor. These discussion groups do not change over the course of the semester, meaning that students interact with the same peers in every module. Discussion assignments are done in these groups and are set up with deadlines; rubrics are used to encourage regular participation and peer involvement, and to facilitate ease of grading.

Each student in a group is responsible for being the discussion leader more than once per semester. As discussion leaders, students are obligated to post an essay-type leading response of about 200 words to the instructor’s prompt. Leaders’ posts should express personal opinions or points of view in a concise, clear manner, and they must be supported by the content of the videos, notes, readings, and so forth. The weeks in which each student will be a discussion leader are assigned randomly at the beginning of the semester, so that students can plan in advance. In our experience, for a regular semester (fall or spring), requiring each student to be the discussion leader and to provide a leading post twice works well.

The rest of the students in the group are expected to comment on the leading posts by the discussion leaders—they play the role of discussion commenters. The number of comments required from each commenter each week can vary, and in our experience requiring at least two total comments each week (either to the same leader post or to several posts) works well. The goal is to engage discussion commenters in a meaningful online conversation with the discussion leaders primarily and with other discussion commenters if possible.

Discussion prompts present a case or a quote to reflect upon, and students are asked to provide their informed point of view on the topic. Instructions include a reminder about how linguistic practices are perceived differently by distinct groups in our society,
so students are expected to engage in the conversation with respect and compassion, whether as leaders or as commenters. Given the diversity of the languages we study and the groups that speak them, discussion boards can be a space not only for content learning but also for understanding how others see the world. Students are encouraged to engage with the course material by reflecting on their first-hand experiences, and they are also invited to share those experiences if they feel comfortable doing so.

Consider this example. If the plan is to engage students in twelve discussion activities (each of them in a learning module; see §3.3) during the semester, then the class is divided into groups of twelve students. The instructor can establish that there will be two discussion leaders and ten discussion commenters each week. If so, and if each commenter is required to provide two comments, leaders’ responses will receive ten comments each, to which the leader will have to respond. Accordingly, the average thread will have about twenty-one contributions in it. This number of contributions is small enough for students to read completely; it is also a manageable number for graduate TAs to review and grade. This system has proved to work well in large classes, with multiple students engaging and heated debates happening each week.

Since several groups of students are working at the same time, it is possible to assign different discussion prompts to each group. Having different discussion prompts diversifies the array of questions students have to think about, encouraging broader critical engagement. This method also reduces the chances of cheating by several students submitting the same leading post in different discussion groups, a problem that is particularly hard to spot if each group is graded by different graduate TAs.

Each discussion group is assigned to a specific undergraduate TA for the whole term. The TA’s specific role is to monitor the discussion board activity, screening posts for inappropriate or off-topic content and fostering discussion between students. Through the discussion board, the undergraduate TA becomes a familiar figure to the students, and this familiarity may encourage otherwise hesitant students to reach out in the event of any issues or questions. The undergraduate TAs also come to know the students in their discussion groups over the course of the semester. In this way, if a student fails to submit a discussion post for several consecutive weeks, it will not go unnoticed; the undergraduate TA can then reach out to the student and resolve any potential issues before they worsen.

The important innovation that we introduced to the course is the assigning of students to leader and commenter roles within small groups. This way, every student in the class has to provide an opinion about each course module, whether an essay-type leading post or a shorter comment and a personal perspective on the topic. This approach makes both students’ and instructors’ workloads manageable, as it keeps students constantly engaged in the course content and does away with full essay grading. Alternative approaches, where each student is required to submit a certain number of essays per semester or where students have to make a discussion board post for each course topic, proved to be less effective. In the former case, students concentrate only on the modules for which they have to make a submission; in the latter, there are not enough responses to discussion posts to ensure discussion and exchanges of ideas.

Evaluating discussion interactions. A rubric allows the evaluator (whether the instructor or graduate TAs) to identify where a student’s post has met the criteria; it also helps with interrater reliability across multiple graders. Two rubrics are used in evaluation of discussion board posts: one for leading posts (Table 1) and another for comments (Table 2).
As one can see from the rubrics, we hold the essay-type leading posts to a higher standard, and these require careful grading by instructors. The leading-post rubric devotes four points to participation (‘Timely submission’ and ‘Word count’) and six to quality. To receive a passing grade, a post needs first to be well organized (‘Organization’) and readable (‘Grammar and spelling’). Moreover, the post needs to present some original and informed thoughts or opinions (‘Thought’).

Because of the nature of the course, and because a substantial number of students are nonnative speakers of English or speakers of nonstandard dialects of English, we evaluate student posts based more on content than form. If the post is readable, small errors in grammar and spelling are overlooked. As for the content itself, this is perhaps the most difficult criterion to assess, and the instructors of the course should agree at the beginning of the semester on what constitutes the threshold for a post with original, informed thoughts or opinions (‘Thought’).

Because of the nature of the course, and because a substantial number of students are nonnative speakers of English or speakers of nonstandard dialects of English, we evaluate student posts based more on content than form. If the post is readable, small errors in grammar and spelling are overlooked. As for the content itself, this is perhaps the most difficult criterion to assess, and the instructors of the course should agree at the beginning of the semester on what constitutes the threshold for a post with original, informed thoughts or opinions (‘Thought’).

For comments, by contrast, it is the participation (‘Word count’ and ‘Submission’) that really counts for a major part of the grade, with only one point of five given for the quality of the submission. The criterion ‘Quality’, in this case, refers to similar values as the criterion ‘Thought’, although with a somewhat laxer threshold, as the posts themselves are shorter. Ideally, commenter posts do not contradict the reading materials without support and are not a stale repetition of someone else’s post or writing.

Rubrics organized this way reduce the problems associated with grading in a large class of several hundred students, in that only a handful of leading posts each week require detailed grading. For instance, in a class with 420 students and twelve learning modules, seventy leading posts are created each week, which is a manageable number for instructors and graduate TAs to grade in a timely manner. Moreover, because of how our rubrics are set up, students perform well on the discussion boards as long as they engage with the module beforehand.
Advantages of the small-group approach. We believe that the discussion model we have adopted in Language in the US has several advantages over the general discussion board model. First, the small-group approach fosters more dialogue. When hundreds of students post to the same discussion board, few students take the time to read and respond to the comments of their peers, resulting in fewer interpersonal interactions. We observed that rather than encouraging dialogue, a class-wide discussion board became a forum for coexisting monologues on the same topic. In contrast, when fewer students are assigned to a discussion board, students take the time to read their peers’ posts and enter into conversations with one another.

Small discussion groups also enhance interpersonal interactions. Since the discussion groups do not change over the course of the semester, students get to know their peers. They begin to address each other by name in their posts and respond more thoughtfully to one another. Discussion leaders relate discussion prompts to their individual experiences, and discussion commenters respond in kind. The interactions establish a community of learning, and we have seen an increase in engagement and more meaningful exchanges.

Finally, the discussion group model increases student retention. When hundreds of students post to the same discussion board, students can feel anonymous, resulting in attrition. In small groups, students cannot assume anonymity. If they disappear from the discussion boards, their absence is noticed both by their peers and by the instructors and TAs monitoring the discussion boards. Instructors can then reach out to students to resolve issues affecting their participation.

To summarize, discussion boards organized into small groups with clear leader and commenter roles present an innovative solution for replacing in-class discussions with a structured approach in which students are able to freely express their opinions and engage in conversations.

3.3. Module-based structure. Since online courses cannot simply be a replica of in-person courses, they should be designed in a systematic way, so that all students can easily access relevant content materials, engage in discussions and exams wherever they are and whenever they want to within a set time window, and thus achieve the learning goals. With this in mind, a well-structured format is key to running a successful online course. As part of the backward-design framework for Language in the US, we decided to structure the learning activities within an interactive framework using modules. Modules guide students through each learning activity, even without in-person instructions, and students are expected to complete a module in a designated time frame; during a regular semester, each module is completed in a week.

Our modules were developed to take advantage of the particular opportunities offered by an online medium. When designing the modular structure of the course, we considered two components: the content and the format. Both components play a crucial role in creating the educational experience necessary for achieving the course’s learning goals.

Content selection. The modules in Language in the US chunk content into several interconnected elements. Content chunking refers to an instructional-design strategy that helps students better process information as it is organized and grouped in small pieces (Miller 1956, Gobet 2005). Content was chunked into small module elements that students could navigate through at their own pace each week. We believe that chunking is particularly important for online learning as it allows students to identify the key information of the module, to revisit content in different formats, and to more
easily organize their learning experience. As of Spring 2022, we have seventeen complete modules, each of which corresponds to a different topic in the course.

The content of each module is organized around an invited lecture (see §3.1) and supported by other learning materials in different formats, including self-assessments and peer discussions. As the modules are self-contained in terms of content, the instructor can select the ones they want to offer during any given academic term and establish a sequence for them. The general recommendation of the project team is that the LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS module appear first as an introduction to the rest of the course. Even though the module sequence can vary from semester to semester, the content to select from is purposefully distributed among the following categories: varieties of English, non-English languages, and language in context.

The first category includes modules on the regional varieties of English (BRITISH ENGLISH VS. AMERICAN ENGLISH, AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS, NEW YORK CITY ENGLISH), its social varieties (AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH, CHICANO ENGLISH, TEEN ENGLISH), and its historical varieties (HISTORY OF ENGLISH). This content category encourages students to examine the salient linguistic features of each variety, as well as the historical, educational, and political factors influencing the current status of each variety in the United States. The module on African American English, for example, discusses the use of habitual be and remote bin, the influence of the Great Migration on the spread of this variety throughout the United States (Finegan & Rickford 2004, Tamasi & Antieau 2014), and attitudes about and prejudice toward the variety (Rickford & King 2016). Ultimately, dialectal variation is described in order to make the point that no variety is intrinsically superior to another, only potentially more socially prestigious.

The second category contains modules on languages different from English, such as NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES, SPANISH IN THE UNITED STATES, AMERICAN CREOLE LANGUAGES, and AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE (ASL). This content category invites students to analyze the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of the languages that coexist in the United States. The Native American languages module, for example, introduces students to the variety of indigenous languages in the United States and their protected or unprotected status, as well as to the systematic governmental suppression of Native languages and the ongoing challenges to language revitalization. Students learn from an invited lecture by Wesley Leonard and from readings on intergenerational trauma and language reclamation (Leonard 2008). They also learn about the Native American communities and languages spoken in the areas surrounding the university. Central to these modules is the notion that these languages are of equal linguistic value to English.

The third category, language in context, corresponds to modules on sociolinguistics (LANGUAGE AND GENDER, LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE), applied linguistics (FORENSIC LINGUISTICS), multilingualism (HERITAGE AND IMMIGRANT LANGUAGES, BILINGUALISM), and the module LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS, which provides a broad introduction to the field of linguistics. The content is based on real-world situations in which even basic linguistics training is a powerful tool of analysis. Students who have not experienced linguistic discrimination learn that it is real, rather than merely theoretical, and that it is pervasive, though they may not have been aware of it or had a name for it previously. This content category encourages students to consider the present and the future of linguistic communities in American society, and to reflect on their roles as educated citizens in perpetuating or ceasing forms of discrimination. For example, students learn from a meticulous analysis of Rachel Jeantel’s testimony during the trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin (Rickford & King 2016); from
an explanation of the factors that drive the social prestige of certain language varieties over others; and from their own reflections on their experiences as speakers of heritage and immigrant languages.

In any course, the quality of the content may be limited only by the knowledge and expertise of the content creator. For Language in the US, we have negotiated this limitation by bringing in experts spanning subfields, institutions, and academic ranks to deliver information directly to students with no mediating filters. In addition, the content of the course is kept fresh and engaging by developing new modules, as new sociolinguistic phenomena and examples are happening even at this moment, as well as by modernizing old modules, in order to provide a better learning experience for our students. We view this course as one that changes and evolves to meet new issues. The result of this approach is innovative content that is informed by cutting-edge research and diverse perspectives.

**Module elements.** Since students go through the learning process at their own pace, the content must be organized logically and progressively. Our module design assumes that learning is constructed by the activities our students perform, so we made every effort to offer them a clear description of the elements of the module, instructions for approaching the study of the module, and the content itself in small pieces that are conceptually related. Accordingly, each module follows the same structure, with nine elements numbered from 0 to 8 for easy navigation. Figure 5 presents a sample view of the nine elements for one module on the LMS.

![Figure 5. Elements in the New York City English module.](image)
This is a video that the instructors have selected and linked to the module platform to allow students to get familiar with the topic as a first contact with the lesson.

The second section of a module is composed of the learning activities involving content-specific materials. The document *Basic notions* contains the lecture notes for the module, which have been carefully created to clearly explain the relevant linguistic notions and phenomena. Helpful examples, text excerpts, infographics, pictures, links to related videos, and the like are included. The document is followed by the *Invited lecture*, the fifteen-minute video featuring an invited expert on the topic (as explained in §3.1). The audiovisual is accompanied by the document *Written version of the invited lecture*, which is created based on an automatic transcription of the spoken version with slight modifications to better fit into written English. Although the transcript serves as the textbook chapter for the module, an additional element, *Reading(s)*, offers further insights on the topic. This element contains linguistics articles (or excerpts from them, depending on the length and depth) that enable students to further navigate the topic through active reading. To compile these articles, we make use of the university library or open access resources.

The last section of a module includes the learning activities that involve direct application of the content. Students can evaluate their own learning by using the brief assessment tool *Practice quiz*. This tool consists of five multiple-choice or true/false questions, and students are given ten minutes to complete it. Since it is a practice quiz, it is optional, and students can practice with the quiz as many times as they like. Students are required to actively engage with other students in the course by participating in the peer discussion under *Discussion*, either as a discussion leader or as a commenter (see §3.2 for explanation). Thought-provoking discussion prompts are provided for the specific module, along with instructions on engaging in the conversation with respect and compassion. Discussion leaders initiate the discussions by responding to the prompts, and commenters leave constructive feedback or comments on whichever posts they want to respond to. Finally, when the students feel ready to be tested and within the designated time period for the module, they interact with the *Graded quiz*. The format and time limit of the graded quiz are the same as those of the practice quiz, but it is required and graded, and can be taken only once. In general, the graded components of the course include discussion board participation, quizzes, and cumulative midterm and final exams. In a typical semester, the two lowest quiz grades will be dropped, as will the two lowest scores for commenter posts on the discussion board. The self-assessment practice quizzes are not computed into the final grade.

The modular structure of *Language in the US* also allows it to be adapted to shorter terms, despite its original design for a semester-long course. As the structure and sequence of the modules are inherently flexible, the course can easily be fitted into any term length, including winter terms, summer terms, and quarter terms. As an example, we have adaptations of the course for the winter and summer terms at our institution, which are three and six weeks long, respectively.

In sum, an innovative module-based format has been key for the student learning experience in *Language in the US*. Modules have helped the course counteract some downsides that an online course might have compared to in-person courses. In addition, this systematic format enables students to stay on track, even with no direct interaction with instructors, and to participate in the online course more actively.

### 3.4. Evidence of effectiveness.

As a way to keep our offerings of *Language in the US* excellent, we have incorporated quality assessments of our course model into our ongoing planning. Even though there is no consensus on what course or curriculum
quality exactly is (Du Toit 2014), we are fully aware that our quality assessment cannot be product-centered. Rather, we aim for a quality assessment that is student-centered, based on the alignment of the course learning goals with the students’ achievements of them. Accordingly, we decided to use the quality assessments to assess how well our students have deepened their understanding of the content by comparing two time points in their learning process: the beginning and end of the semester.²

In Spring 2021, we asked our students to complete a precourse and a postcourse survey. The pre survey was completed by 294 students (of 360 enrolled), whereas 150 students completed the post survey. In each survey, students were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with ten statements (the same statements in both surveys) on a Likert scale with five points: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. All ten statements were related to the content of our course. For the purposes of this article, we do not focus on the intensity of agreement or disagreement, and so compile ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ as a single category AGREE, present ‘neither agree nor disagree’ as NEUTRAL, and compile ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ as DISAGREE. Also, we report only on responses to those statements where students’ answers changed in a significant way, or where a plurality of the students had no opinion about the statements at the beginning of the semester, but by the end, most had formed an opinion in the direction of what was discussed in the course.

Students’ responses to the statement Some varieties of English are more grammatically correct than others changed significantly. At the beginning of the semester, a large number of the students agreed with the statement, but most disagreed with it by the end, as shown in Figure 6. A chi-square test of independence showed that these changes are significant ($p < 0.01$).

![Figure 6. Survey responses for Some varieties of English are more grammatically correct than others.](image)

² The Office of Research Compliance at Stony Brook University indicated that Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is necessary only for research or generalizable knowledge, while the use of surveys in this article is for the purpose of quality assurance/quality integrity (QA/QI). We were instructed that we could proceed and even publish without going through an IRB process.
For other statements, a plurality of the students had no opinion about the statements at the beginning of the semester, but most had formed an opinion consistent with the course content by the end. Two statements belong in this category: *Some varieties of a language are more prestigious than others, but not more grammatically correct* (Figure 7) and *American Sign Language (ASL) has its own grammatical structure that is different from English* (Figure 8). A chi-square test of independence showed that these changes are significant (for both, \( p < 0.01 \)).

![Figure 7](image7.png)

*Figure 7. Survey responses for *Some varieties of a language are more prestigious than others, but not more grammatically correct.*

![Figure 8](image8.png)

*Figure 8. Survey responses for *American Sign Language (ASL) has its own grammatical structure that is different from English.*

We recognize the need to use varied metrics to evaluate courses, and increased enrollment can also provide evidence of the effectiveness of the course. Every semester more and more students want to register for Language in the US, requiring us to limit enrollment to 360 during the fall and spring semesters. The course is always full, with a
waiting list of students wanting to take it. In the previous version of the course, we had approximately 100 students enrolled per semester. In addition, we used to offer this course occasionally during the summer and winter semesters with very few students enrolled (fewer than ten), and now our summer/winter enrollments have been in the range of twenty-five to forty.

Our assessment of student learning and increased enrollment shows the effectiveness of Language in the US. We will continue to conduct quality assessments for our offerings of the course.

4. Conclusion. Access to online education has become increasingly necessary over the past decade, and even more since the pandemic lockdown. In this article, we have discussed how the team behind LIN 200 ‘Language in the United States’, a large, asynchronous, general-education course taught at Stony Brook University, has met the demands of online education by creating a course model whose content and format are the product of a series of pedagogical innovations. The course’s main aim is to help students develop metalinguistic knowledge and an awareness of the sociocultural complexity of language varieties. This was achieved not by simplistically replicating the structure and format of the previous in-person course, but by considering how the web-based, asynchronous format could best serve our learning outcomes.

Our use of the understanding-by-design framework (Wiggins & McTighe 2005) and the application of the community-of-inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2000, 2010) encourage student interaction and engagement. We also took advantage of the different responsibilities assigned to the members of the instructional team throughout both the course design and offering stages, and thus maximized the contact and communication on both sides of the screen.

These considerations led to a fully learner-centered course structure, which couples content innovations with the technological advantages of a web-based platform. Language in the US effectively combines the furthering of linguistic knowledge and the undoing of misconceptions about languages in the United States in order to achieve the overarching goal of inspiring ideas about and belief in linguistic equality in our students, while maintaining high pedagogical standards through a learner-centered approach. The course model presented in this article is the product of a series of pedagogical innovations, including video creation with invited lectures based on the learning goals, dynamic discussion boards with assigned roles for students, and a module-based structure adaptable for different academic term lengths. As part of the course design, Language in the US is a flexible living entity, regularly changing and adapting to new needs.

Overall, our novel course model combined diverse linguistic content with pedagogical innovations for online delivery to create a successful online instructional experience. The content was curated in a way that leads our students to deepen their linguistic awareness about the languages and varieties that coexist in the United States, while the format allows our students to learn the material both individually and with their classmates. Modeling a course that offers versatility in the way students interact with material, our course has not sacrificed peer engagement or continuous communication. We hope that the presentation of this detailed process of course creation and implementation will serve to inspire other institutions to create similar large-scale, online, asynchronous courses as a means to educate their students in the important content that is taught in Language in the US.
APPENDIX: INVITED LECTURERS IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

Mark Aronoff (Stony Brook University), John Baugh (Washington University in St. Louis), Kara Becker (Reed College), Evan Bradley (Penn State University, Brandywine), Cecelia Cutler (City University of New York), Marianna Di Paolo (University of Utah), Carmen Ebner (Queen Mary University of London), Carmen Fought (Pitzer College), Agnes He (Stony Brook University), Lynn Hou (University of California, Santa Barbara), William Labov (University of Pennsylvania), Robert Leonard (Hofstra University), Wesley Leonard (University of California, Riverside), Ryan Lepic (Gallaudet University), Erez Levon (University of Bern), Andrew Lynch (University of Miami), John McWhorter (Columbia University), John R. Rickford (Stanford University), Gareth Roberts (University of Pennsylvania), Devyani Sharma (Queen Mary University of London), Sali Tagliamonte (University of Toronto), and Walt Wolfram (North Carolina State University)

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