Using a Web Radio Project to Connect Generation 1.5 Students to Classroom Instruction

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In the past three years of teaching oral communication to non-native speakers of English at LaGuardia, I’ve encountered extraordinary and complex diversity. I’ve had students with degrees from universities in their home countries who can read and write English but don’t have sufficient fluency in English to order food in a restaurant. In that same class, I’ve had fluent English speakers who are bilingual but don’t read or write at the college level in either of the languages they speak and understand. And mixed in with these two extremes, I’ve also had those who learned to speak English as a third or fourth language while driving a New York City taxi, working as a nanny for an Upper East Side family, or waiting tables in a Jackson Heights restaurant. These combinations of language abilities and experiences in the same class can be maddening because the very teaching methods and classroom activities that serve one group can easily discourage and alienate another.

On the other hand, this type of situation can prove to be a feast for instructors like me who savor linguistic variety and student diversity. I’ve discovered that even though the difficulty of teaching students with such a wide variety of language abilities can be daunting, it can also be inspiring. This particular situation has pushed me to think of new ways to integrate my passion for oral history, radio, and digital media into my oral communication classes. I’ve discovered that by focusing syllabi on a production-focused project such as a radio show, I can successfully engage a wide variety of students placed in my classes. The story of Carla Fuentes (not her real name) shows the difference that this type of project can make.

Carla emigrated from Ecuador with her parents when she was ten years old. She attended public schools in New York’s Washington Heights neighborhood and graduated from a public high school before beginning her college career at LaGuardia in Fall 2004. At that time, she enrolled in Communication and the Non-Native Speaker (HUL100), which the LaGuardia catalog describes as a three-credit course designed to help students develop facility with English when it is not their native language. Carla was a fluent English speaker who was comfortable communicating orally in two languages, Spanish at home with her family and in her neighborhood, and English at school and at her part-time job in an Upper West Side grocery chain. When I met her a year after she had taken HUL 100 for the first time, she told me that she never thought of herself as an ESL student and was very embarrassed and discouraged to be in an oral communication class with students who couldn’t speak English as well as she could. She conveyed to me that most of her classmates were still struggling to express themselves in accurate, fluent, and idiomatic English, and some, in fact, were reluctant to speak at all.

Even though Carla felt that she might not be in the right class during her first week of college, she didn’t say anything to her instructor since, as she told me, “I was new and didn’t want to drop a class. I thought then that I would lose my financial aid if I did.” However, as the semester progressed, her behavior reflected the way she felt. A few weeks into the semester, she alienated herself from the instructor and her ESL classmates by not attending class regularly and by not completing any of the required homework assignments. She told me that when she did attend, she always arrived at least twenty to thirty minutes late with what she described as “an attitude.” As a result, she earned an “F” in HUL 100 at the end of her first semester in college.

Fast forward from Fall I 2004, Carla’s first semester at LaGuardia, to Fall II 2005, more than a year later. Repeating the course, Carla enrolled in the section of HUL 100 that I was teaching. She was absent the first day of class.
when I typically videotape students individually to assess their speaking abilities. I also ask them to complete a questionnaire that gives me snapshots of their language use along with their cultural and educational backgrounds. Carla missed this important first day diagnostic. She was absent for the second class and arrived thirty minutes late on the third day. When she entered the room, she seemed oblivious to what was going on and made a beeline to one of the empty seats in the back row, distancing herself from the rest of the students. She didn’t take off her parka, nor did she unpack any books from her backpack; it was obvious that she would have preferred to be anywhere but in this HUL 100 classroom.

As soon as class ended, Carla got up and left, avoiding eye contact with me or with any of the other students. I approached her before she reached the door and asked her to stay a few minutes. As we walked to my desk at the front of the classroom, I asked why she had missed the first couple of days and why she had arrived late on the third day. There was a long silence as she looked down at the floor. I began to explain that because Fall II was a short semester with only six weeks of class, missing one class during this time was the equivalent of missing a week during a regular twelve-week semester. My students in past HUL 100 classes almost exactly matched Carla’s behavior and attitude, so I was not at all surprised when she answered me in fluent English, “I took this class before. Last year I got an F. I need a higher grade now. I want to go to nursing school.” I asked her a few more questions about her background: where and when she was born, where she went to school in the U.S., and what type of instruction she had received in English. I listened as she told me her story.

As what Carla said confirmed my assumptions about her situation, I didn’t insist she drop the class, even though she had missed almost a week of instruction. Carla’s language use, life experience, and the way she described herself all indicated a college student who was not typical of either first or second generation immigrants. Rather, Carla was somewhere in the middle.

Language scholars Linda Harklau and Mark Roberge refer to students like Carla as “generation 1.5 students because they share characteristics of both first and second-generation immigrants” (Harklau 1; Roberge 107). Generally speaking, first generation immigrants arrive as adults, and are educated, fluent, and skilled in their native language. Second generation immigrants are often from immigrant families and are wholly U.S. educated. “Because they were born in the United States, they usually end up English dominant” (Roberge 108).

Born in Ecuador and partially educated in schools there and in the U.S., Carla fit Harklau and Roberge’s description of a generation 1.5 student, as did many students I had encountered in my LaGuardia classes. In addition, since her education in the U.S. took place in mostly overcrowded, urban public schools, her instruction in English consisted of drills, short answers, and some writing from models. She told me she had had little exposure to reading and essay writing before coming to LaGuardia. She also mentioned that she didn’t like to read and couldn’t write that well in either Spanish or English. She preferred to talk.

This information suggested why she might have been placed into HUL 100 during her first semester. LaGuardia enrolls students into oral communication classes based on placement test scores in reading and writing, not on a test that would assess a student’s oral and aural skills. As in Carla’s case, many generation 1.5 students attend substandard public schools and therefore begin college having had very little or poor writing and reading instruction in high school. In addition, many generation 1.5 students live and work in neighborhoods where English is not the primary language of communication. These students often place into ESL writing classes because their writing reflects how they speak. That is, it often contains some linguistic characteristics of non-native speakers even though there is a level of fluency that traditional ESL students don’t always have. Their inexperience as writers, along with a Hispanic or Asian surname, may also guarantee them a placement in ESL. As a result, many generation 1.5 stu-
dents like Carla often feel misunderstood and invisible once they get to college.

After speaking with Carla, I drew this conclusion: In 2004, when Carla first enrolled at LaGuardia, her writing and reading placement test scores probably led an advisor to assume that she was an ESL student and suggest she take HUL 100, a course designed for traditional second-language learners of English, not students matching Carla’s profile and experience. I’ve discovered that courses such as HUL 100, originally designed for and taught primarily with the more traditional ESL profile in mind, can discourage and alienate generation 1.5 students unless instructors acknowledge and build on students’ strong oral communication skills and familiarity with life in the United States. Engaging generation 1.5 students in classroom instruction that builds on their strengths rather than focusing solely on their deficiencies as readers and writers can help students stay in school rather than drop out.

Based on my understanding of her situation, I empathized with Carla and decided to let her stay in the class. Even though she was off to a shaky start, I thought she would be able to receive a passing grade and contribute to the class in a meaningful way. If Carla could finish with at least a “C,” she would not have to repeat HUL 100 yet a third time.

After listening to her story, I gave her a copy of the course syllabus, emphasizing the attendance and participation requirements. I explained the course objectives and policies; she listened attentively. She nodded a couple of times and thanked me for taking time to understand her particular situation. Smiling, she assured me that she would be on time and wouldn’t miss any more classes. As I watched her leave, I felt as if we had reached an understanding.

The second week of classes began; Carla arrived twenty minutes late. Without acknowledging me or anyone else, she walked to her seat in the back row, again separating herself from the rest of the class. I was disappointed. I felt betrayed. I thought she knew I wanted her to succeed. When I had spoken with her the week before, she assured me that she would arrive on time. Given that she had arrived late again and seemed as uninterested as she was the first week, I gave up on her. I didn’t say anything to her after class. My new plan was to calculate the number of times she had been late and suggest she drop the course. With twenty-six other students needing my attention and energy, I did not have time to continue dealing with a student who was unwilling to cooperate and take advantage of a second chance.

To my surprise, the following day Carla was already in her usual back row seat when I began taking attendance. After a few general announcements, I introduced the class project: producing a radio show for LaGuardia’s Web Radio Station. As I glanced around the room, I noticed that Carla was actually paying attention to what I was saying. I began describing plans for the class radio project by explaining that each student would have an opportunity to create a radio segment that would be broadcast live on the Web Radio station at the end of the semester. I observed that Carla was carefully reading the information about the project that I had written on the board. She raised her hand and in a challenging tone of voice, asked, “Is this for real?” When I asked her what she meant, she continued, “I mean, are we really going to be on the radio? Or is this just some kind of homework assignment or something? Like, are people outside our class really going to be able to listen to us?” I smiled and answered, “Yes.”

As I began explaining the concept of web radio broadcasting and the steps involved in creating a radio show, there was a change in Carla’s body language and level of attentiveness that I had never experienced in twenty years of teaching. Carla changed from being uninterested and dismissive to being attentive and curious. Until that time, I had thought this was a classroom moment reserved for teachers in Hollywood movies like To Sir with Love and Stand and Deliver.

As the project developed over the following weeks, Carla took a leadership role. She organized a production group called the DJs, whose five members included other South American
students who spoke English less fluently and accurately than she did and who weren’t as familiar with New York City. The focus of their show developed into what to do and see in New York City that was free or inexpensive. Carla became the group leader and expert. Her experience growing up in New York City and her oral fluency were essential to the work the DJs accomplished. Her ability to use English to organize, negotiate, persuade, and explain along with her knowledge of local culture raised her overall profile in the class. Rather than separating from those who spoke English less fluently and comfortably, Carla patiently interacted with them and listened as they began to express themselves with more confidence. Who she was and how she spoke became classroom assets rather than liabilities.

By the time the class was ready to go live on the air, the DJs had produced an entertaining show with strong and original content. A few days following their broadcast, Carla told me that she and another student from the DJs wanted to continue working on radio projects for the Web Radio station. She even asked me if it would be possible for them to have their own show because they wanted to talk about, among other things, the importance of accurate placement and advising at LaGuardia. As she put it, “I’d like to share my experiences so other students don’t have to feel so discouraged and experience what I did.”

The Radio Web project succeeded because students created program content that relied heavily on discussions within the class and interviews with other faculty, staff, and students outside of class. All students, regardless of their level of oral proficiency, found these interactions meaningful, gaining confidence in their writing by transforming their interviews into written reports and ultimately into radio scripts. In this way, they learned to trust their voices and gain an understanding of how language use can vary depending on the purpose and audience. I was able to target grammar and pronunciation instruction using authentic material they created both individually and with their production team.

Everyone benefited from vocal instruction that emphasized using the voice to enhance meaning. While they prepared and practiced for their radio debut, students with more accurate pronunciation helped those who spoke less accurately. In addition, during the required lab hour in the Speech Center, students listened to themselves and to each other, and addressed specific problems related to pronunciation difficulties and vocal expression.

All students were motivated to do their best work because the project involved a real audience outside of the classroom. The novelty and thrill of sitting in a real radio station on the LaGuardia campus and broadcasting to a potential audience around the world made the project come alive, making it relevant to the students and what they care about. In the end, that realness and relevancy motivated the entire class, including Carla, to work together to do creative and meaningful work, and to increase their confidence and strengthen their oral skills while having fun.

WORKS CITED
