“Some words are soaked in blood”:
the importance of the language we use with students

Brent Weaver, K-State First
bweaver2@ksu.edu

Session notes:

My name is Brent Weaver, and I work with K-State First on campus. And yes, my session title sounds a LITTLE dramatic, but I promise it'll make sense in less than five minutes.

I want you to think about a time you’ve been in a meeting, a class, etc. and someone made a comment that made your jaw drop. Maybe the comment was rude or condescending or sexist, but the key is that it felt out of place. I imagine that we ALL have been in this situation. If we’re really honest, I think we all have been the PERSON who has made the jaw-dropping comment.

I start here, because when we think about language and power, it’s important to first remember that we’ve all been in a place where we had something to learn (and that we are all still learning).

My biggest moment of learning happened in graduate school. I have an MA in English, and the focus of my graduate education was around how to effectively teach writing courses. Specifically, I studied the field of Language Diversity, which is how to teach writing equitably.

Conversations in this field of study can be tricky, because scholars don’t agree on how to implement language diversity and not all scholars agree that it’s even useful. All this to say that conversations in class could sometimes feel like a landmine – like you might take one wrong step and make an accidental, jaw-dropping comment.

And one day, that happened. We were talking about the use of Black English (which is the focus of most Language Diversity scholarship) and one student said, “Why can Colored People use the n-word but I can’t?”

The room went silent. This was, indeed, one of those jaw-dropping, out of place comments.

Our instructor (who I idolize, by the way) calmly explained that he could instead use “people of color” as “colored people” would offend most folks, and then she continued by saying:

“Some words are soaked in blood. Some words have a history of violence and oppression and inequity, so no matter how hard we try to get rid of a word's meaning, that history is still there.”
I literally said “whoa” under my breath, because I’d just had a transformative educational moment. A moment that influences how I operate as a student affairs professional.

My practice now is to always ask a simple question: do the words I use harm others, or perpetuate some form of inequity? And if so, what can I say instead?

As advisors and administrators, you undoubtably now would like some take-aways. So I have three for you! These strategies aren’t groundbreaking, but I hope they will allow you to employ strategies you already have but perhaps with a new focus:

1. LEARN: Learn what words perpetuate inequity and which words promote inclusion. One rule of languages is that they’re continually evolving and changing – so this process of learning is life-long. One strategy for learning about language is to read regular student affairs scholarship with LANGUAGE in mind. For instance, while reading about trends in student mental health crises, you can focus on the language the scholar uses to talk about mental health.
2. ACCEPT MISTAKES: While you’re learning, you will undoubtably make a mistake – and potentially cause a jaw-dropping moment. Accept that you’ve made a mistake and use this moment as an opportunity to continue learning.
3. LISTEN TO STUDENTS: As you create policies, publish articles, etc. has a student reviewed your language to make sure it’s inclusive and student-centered? If not, this is a great opportunity for you employ a new, student-friendly strategy.

I’d like to end by taking us back to our land grant mission. If we want to be “responsive to a rapidly changing world” we should remember that LANGUAGE is one of those ever-changing elements – and keep in mind that some words are soaked in blood.

Thank you!