

Title

Slaying Slang: Harnessing the Use of Slang to Bridge the Communication Gap to GenZ Students

Abstract

Have you slipped slang words or phrases into your classroom communication in an attempt to better connect with your students? Was it on point or cringe? In this roundtable, we will bring together faculty interested in thinking through the positive and negative consequences of using slang in their classrooms. We will give a high-level overview of the research in this area and facilitate a brainstorming session about the strategies, ideas, and concerns regarding the use of slang in the college classroom. The discussion will broadly consider the implications of proactively utilizing slang to increase student engagement and classroom climate.

Keywords:

Slang, classroom communication, student engagement

Introduction

Has slang made its way into your classroom? Students typically use slang to communicate with their peers, which is integrated into everyday life because of the use and integration of technology. Students rely on social media apps, text messaging, and social learning to relay information, express emotions and feelings, and stay in touch with each other. The daily use of slang varies significantly from generation to generation. According to a study conducted by Preply, nearly all (98%) of the Gen Z Americans surveyed said they use slang, compared to 81% of Baby Boomers. Additionally, younger Americans simply use slang more often, with 30% using it in nearly every conversation, versus 5% of Baby Boomers (Zajechowski, 2022a, Zajechowski, 2022b). As a result of the ubiquity of this mode of communication, it's no surprise that students bring slang into the classroom and use it to understand business and management topics.

Another challenge for the use of slang is the constant change. A recent Washington Post article demonstrated these changes (Abril, 2022). To older generations, the phrase “only available for a certain amount of time” when used to describe one’s work schedule. GenZ, on the other hand, interprets it as “acting inappropriate, wild, or extreme.” Confusion arises when meanings change, sometimes on purpose and sometimes simply because of unfamiliarity with the word’s origin (Katz et al., 2022).

While many faculty have noticed and prohibited the use of slang in the classroom, are there ways to **bridge the gap between students and professors through the usage of slang** to build better relationships and understand business and management topics?

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Language is the common thread that connects people worldwide. Through the use of language, we can communicate cultural norms, values, and beliefs. The use of language has allowed concepts to develop and information to be disseminated, and with the addition of technology, language has further spread, allowing people from different backgrounds and cultures to exchange information orally and written. Language is constantly changing as its use varies with time, function, grammar, and style changes among different social groups (Gregory & Carroll, 2018). Language transformation leads to the classification of formal and informal language that can be used to convey emotions, values, and perceptions.

In most environments, individuals rely on the use of formal language to communicate. Formal language can be characterized by detachment, accuracy, rigidity, and heaviness (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999). However, informal language, such as slang, can be used to connect people within a group and help distinguish one group from another (Eble, 2004). Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) state that an informal language style is more flexible, direct, implicit, and involved but less informative. Slang is the informal language that is used in everyday interactions (Elsherif & Nsir, 2015). Eble (1996) defined slang as “an ever-changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or group cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large” (Brown, 2016; Elsherif & Nsir, 2015; Eble, 1996).

Slang usage by undergraduate students has been studied for over a century by communications researchers, in K-12 education, and hundreds of other scholars across disciplines (e.g., Hummon, 1994; Martin, Cheseboro & Mottet, 1997; Mazer & Hunt, 2008), but it has rarely been mentioned within the management teaching literature. Although slang has not

been specifically addressed, scholars have explored how communication theory might inform management pedagogy (Brandhorst, 2019; Cluley, 2013; Darics, 2019).

The importance of slang within the culture of universities indicates that its usage is integrated into all aspects of campus/college life, including academically. Language is a tool of communication that permeates all aspects of learning and is often governed by factors like race, gender, class, region, etc. (Sikandar, Riaz, Mah-e-Nao, 2022); Ramburuth & Tani, 2009).

Language is also "a tool of human interaction," according to Wierzbicka (2009), as, through language, we not only convey our thoughts, feelings, and intentions but also relate to other people (Ramburuth & Tani, 2009).

Slang is rooted in social connections, and its usage determines who its user is connected to, the in-group versus the out-group. When individuals are in new environments, it is important that they quickly connect through language, demographic characteristics, and cultural norms. The use of slang can easily connect students as modern slang is often developed and evolves through social media platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. Students who use the same slang feel connected to each other and disconnected from those who do not.

The ability of both instructors and students to communicate their thoughts and feelings effectively influences student engagement. Student engagement is more than just participation, it requires feelings and sensemaking as well as activity (Harper & Quaye, 2009, 2019). Students are more likely to engage if they are supported by teachers who establish inviting learning environments (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Therefore, the use of language within the academic environment is essential to transfer knowledge between professors and students and to keep the learning atmosphere engaging and motivating.

Ultimately, effective and efficient language usage is necessary for there to be a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge between professors and students, with the goal of students being able to understand course content and achieve course-related objectives. As management scholars, we need to understand the implications of using slang in our classroom.

Session Description

The overarching goal of this session is for participants to be able to engage in a discussion about what slang is, how college students use slang to establish and build connections, how slang usage can improve student-professor relationships, and how slang can be used to better deliver management and business concepts. Ultimately, this session is meant to be interactive and to help participants better understand why their students use slang and how its use in the classroom can be beneficial to delivering content knowledge and building better student-professor relations.

We will use a combination of interactive activities, personal reflection, pair-share, and group discussion to meet our session objectives.

During our roundtable, we will use these questions to generate discussion amongst participants regarding their perceptions of slang, slang usage, and the impact of slang on student learning.

1. Given that slang is used to distinguish between the in-group and out-group, is it appropriate for instructors to attempt to access or assimilate into the students' in-group via the use of slang in the classroom?
2. Are there characteristics of instructors, e.g., age, generation, gender, that determine whether slang usage might be effective and appropriate?

3. Does the use of slang influence students' evaluations of instructors—either positively or negatively?
4. How might the use of slang improve student learning outcomes?
5. How might the use of slang improve student engagement?
6. Can we create a rubric for classroom situations, subjects, or formats in which slang is appropriate or inappropriate?
7. Can we create a rubric for the types of words, e.g., positively-valenced, that are appropriate?
8. How might the use of slang risk decreasing learning outcomes for international students, English language learners, and/or students with disabilities?
9. How might the use of slang risk alienating students?
10. Based on your experience with students, how do you think slang usage can improve the relationship between students and instructors?

We will begin by briefly introducing the hosts and presenting our learning goals. We will also describe the session's structure, including the hosts presenting a current list of slang words to test to see how familiar participants are with slang their students may be using. Next, using our preliminary results from our current research, we will facilitate a discussion about the instructors' use of how slang might influence—both positively and negatively—students' perceptions of the instructor and the classroom environment. Finally, we will brainstorm with participants to create a session deliverable compiling strategies for how slang can be integrated into the classroom based on data collected from students in the hosts' classes. The timing below is based on a 60-minute session.

Session Timeline

General Activity	Time Needed
Welcome and introductions.	5 minutes
Activity to test participants on familiarity with current slang words.	5 minutes
Ask the audience to individually reflect on their stance on the usage of slang in the classroom and how they handle students who use slang.	5 minutes
Ask the audience to engage in a pair share on the above reflection prompt and questions.	10 minutes
Debrief with the large group on takeaways from the small group discussions.	15 minutes
Facilitate a guided group discussion about the benefits of slang in the classroom and how to incorporate slang usage.	15 minutes
Concluding remarks and handout.	5 minutes

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