

MICHEL

So why the personal in this course? Well, at every occasion when the students present their discussions-- because they often have a friendly discussion-- or when they write their essays, I do ask them to include some personal information in what they write. In fact, one essay was strictly about that, about their linguistic biographies. Because I feel that often students can be overly ambitious.

DEGRAFF:

Of course, there's this earnestness that we appreciate, but often they want to go after global changes like changing the environment or changing the outcome of elections. But those are the kind of changes that you often cannot make, especially not in a one semester course. But if they are able to understand the way those global patterns affect their own personal lives in their own small social groupings, and if they can actually try to integrate what they learn in the course to actions in these localized spheres, then there's a better chance that they can actually make those changes.

So I like to tell them that the change that they can make in themselves resolving those issues are also affecting the wider world. Because if each person can affect themselves in their small groups and, in turn, if everyone in that small group can also affect changes in their own small groups, then the effect is exponential. You see?

And I think by the end of the course they do appreciate being able to share their personal experiences through essays, through their presentations. And also they can see the effect that this has on their own classmates, because some of their classmates come from very different backgrounds. So they get to understand how someone, say, from Guatemala who came to the US with parents that emigrated without papers and how that life experience can be inspiring, because if you can make it to MIT with that kind of background and then you can actually share it with others while you are actually succeeding as an MIT student, that can be life changing for some of us.