

Social Justice

The way Black language is devalued in schools reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world . . . the anti-Black linguistic racism that is used to diminish Black Language and Black students in classrooms is not separate from the rampant and deliberate anti-Black racism and violence inflicted upon Black people in society.

—April Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice*

Let us demand of ourselves and encourage one another to do more than mouth our commitments: to make our actions match our words; to transform our classrooms, our departments, and our institutions as well as our communities; and to learn from one another as allies who possess the courage to effect change.

—Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young,
*Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in
Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*

Composition pedagogies and practices centered on social justice, antiracism, and linguistic justice as theories and frameworks for teaching writing have become increasingly more visible in composition studies over the last decade. Composition has been marked by turns, or waves in theory and practice. For example, the writing-as-process movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Murray, 1972), the cognitive turn in the early 1980s (Flower & Hayes, 1981), the social turn in the 1980s and 1990s (Berlin, 1988; Trimbur, 1994), the public turn in the 1990s and early 2000s (Mathieu, 2005), and the multimodal and digital turn in the 2000s and 2010s (Selfe, 2007; Shipka, 2011; Yancey, 2004). I think a case could be made that we now find ourselves in a social justice-based orientation to teaching writing or a “social justice” turn (2010s and 2020s).

Race, gender, class, language, privilege, and power have been themes in composition studies throughout its history, yet many first-year composition anthologies (e.g., *Naming What We Know*, Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Tate et al., 2014; *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, Villanueva & Arola, 2011) that take as their purview theories and practices in the field have yet to include a standalone chapter that offers social justice as a pedagogical approach to teaching writing. Often, social justice is linked with other pedagogies and theories like critical pedagogies, queer theory and rhetorics, feminist rhetorics, and translanguaging approaches to writing instruction. Given the substantial research on social justice practices over the last ten years, I include this chapter for teachers interested in taking a more explicit social justice approach to teaching that focuses on race and language⁵.

A basic keyword search for “social justice” in CompPile⁶ results in 117 citations (as of September 2020) with the majority occurring in the last decade. A narrower search for “social justice pedagogy” or “social justice-based pedagogy” returns zero results. That said, there’s been a lot of recent theory and practice in composition studies intersecting race and language through justice-oriented frameworks. Here is a brief, noncomprehensive sketch of this work:

- 2013: Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young coedit a special issue in *Across the Discipline* called “Anti-Racist Activism: Teaching Rhetoric and Composition.”
- 2013: Carmen Kynard publishes *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies*.
- 2015: Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson coedit *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics*.
- 2015: Asao B. Inoue publishes *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*, which provides a framework for social justice writing assessment practices.

5 There are many social justice frameworks, aims, and initiatives writing teachers can take up, including disability justice, criminal justice reform, and LGBTQIA+ rights, to name a few.

6 <https://wac.colostate.edu/compfile/>

- 2015: Christie Toth and Holly Hassel circulate a CFP for “Race, Social Justice, and the Work of the Two-Year College English.”
- 2017: Condon and Young coedit *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, which offers reflective practices and strategies for embracing antiracism.
- 2018: Laura Gonzales publishes *Sites of Translation: What Multilinguals Can Teach Us about Digital Writing and Rhetoric*, which intersects language diversity and technology.
- 2018: Mya Poe, Asao B. Inoue, and Norbert Elliot coedit *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity*, which adopts social justice theory as a means for investigating “the deeply rooted concern for the ways we are bound together, the nature of justified constraint, and the extent of individual freedom” (p. 9).
- 2019: Romeo García and Damián Baca coedit *Rhetorics Elsewhere and Otherwise: Contested Modernities, Decolonial Visions*.
- 2019: Staci Perryman-Clark and Collin Lamont Craig coedit *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From the Margins to the Center*.
- 2019: *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal* launches as an “open-access journal committed to activism in writing, rhetoric, and literacy studies.”⁷
- 2020: Aja Y. Martinez publishes *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*.
- 2020: April Baker-Bell publishes *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*.
- 2020: The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) releases a demand for Black linguistic justice in response to the anti-Black racist violence and police brutality against Black people and communities in the US.
- 2020: Louis M. Maraj publishes *Black or Right: Anti/Racist Campus Rhetorics*.

Social justice pedagogies, practices, and rhetorics have increased in visibility over the last ten years in composition scholarship, but

⁷ In July 2020, Volume 2 honored/celebrated Black studies, social movements, and activism.

I would be remiss to not acknowledge that the roots of this work are tied to earlier texts that helped pave the way for us as a field: “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language” (CCCC, 1974); *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Smitherman, 1977); *Lives on the Boundary* (Rose, 1989); *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color* (Villanueva, 1993), to name a few.

This chapter is dedicated to social justice because I see this as the present and future of rhetoric and composition in the 21st century. Teaching writing should be about investigating how language is perceived, how language is valued, what biases are attached to language, what attitudes are associated with language, and what systems and structures are privileging some linguistic variations/habits and disadvantaging others. Writing pedagogies and classrooms can embolden the value of *all languages and dialects*.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews in this chapter offer different orientations to social justice through teaching writing. I talk with Frankie Condon, Asao B. Inoue, John Duffy, Cruz Medina, and Cecilia Shelton about how they incorporate social justice practices in their classes. These teacher-scholars frame teaching around race, language, ethics, and multicultural rhetoric. The overarching theme here is how it takes an intentional effort and critical consciousness to embody social justice values and aims. Condon describes how her writing assignments focus on antiracism and how she asks students to think critically about their histories and experiences with language. Inoue problematizes traditional assessment standards attached to judging language and assessing writing. Duffy talks about reimagining traditions and classroom values and practices. He asks, “What do our practices tell us about ethics?” and he talks about how teaching writing is always connected to rhetorical ethics. Medina shares how he intersects digital and multicultural rhetorics to frame social justice, and how technology and social media platforms maintain cultural norms that privilege some and oppress others. Shelton concludes by offering a Black feminist pedagogical framework for disrupting traditional norms and expectations for teaching writing.

Shane to Frankie Condon: How does social justice and antiracism play out in your classroom practices, for example, your writing assignments? [Episode 28: 17:37–22:53]

I'll talk about a couple assignments, and I'll offer the caveat that none of this is perfect. None of it works perfectly all the time, or I fail at it all the time, right? I'm just always on the quest to learn how to do it better next time. This semester, for example, I'm teaching a first-year writing class. It's an introduction to academic writing and all of the students in my class are math or computer science majors. The first assignment that we're doing, I actually have adapted from an assignment I found in a book called *What Makes Writing Good?* This is a really old, edited collection. In this edited collection, Jim Sledd . . . included a piece in this book with permission he had taken from a friend who was teaching at Claffin College.

The assignment was to write four dialogues. Each dialogue should reveal something new about the writer, some new aspect that they would want people to know about them, right? So the first dialogue would be with a police officer, the second with a perspective employer, the third with a best friend, and the fourth with a small child. The writing sample that Jim Sledd includes with this assignment is one that's written in African American English or an African American English. Oftentimes, if I've used that in a writing center theory and practice course, the first response of prospective tutors is to fix and change that writing. To talk about how they would tutor that person in order to make that and to straighten up that prose. Right?

But of course that's a problem because the assignment asks the student to reveal things about themselves. What this particular writing sample shows about this writer is that when confronted by the police, he is inclined to call out the racism of the police rather than capitulate to it, and to do it in a fierce kind of street way. He shifts his mode of

address in talking with the perspective employer but does so without trying to step out of who he is. He's just performing it in a different way, right? You can see this happening in each of the dialogues that this student writer has produced. The first assignment for my class this semester is to write that set of dialogues for themselves.

My prediction is that they're going to write these dialogues and as best as they can, they're going to make them all the same and try and wipe out all of those differences in discourse that they would in fact use if they were talking to their best friend, or they were talking to a small child. So then we're going to work on putting those things back in. How do you do that thing where you recognize this is how I would actually talk to a police officer, this is how it's different than how I would talk to my best friend, and this is what those differences reveal about me that I want an audience to know of who I am, how I represent myself, who my audience is and what I want them to know and my agency in revealing or withholding?

Then, the last assignment is called the funk it up assignment. They read Vershawn Young's "Should Writers Use Their Own English?" and we investigate the debate between Young and Stanley Fish. Then they can choose one of the pieces of writing they've done throughout the term and their job is to learn how to code-mesh, which of course requires that you understand how sentences work much more deeply than if you simply write correct White sentences, or standard academic English sentences. You can't fake it. You have to actually learn how to do it. To write in an academic context or to write in a professional context should never mean that you leave yourself and your home language and home discourses at home. Those should come with you. The question is how to use them in ways that are fun, creative and smart.

Shane to Frankie Condon: So obviously this work goes a lot deeper than assignments. I'm interested in the conversations you have with

students about language and languaging because I know that has to be a central part of antiracist work in the writing classroom. [Episode 28: 22:54–25:06]

It seems to me students come to my classroom having already deeply internalized the notion their home languages or home discourses diverged from what they've been taught as standard academic English, or a normative English, a White English. That those home languages are *wrong*. So in order to make some determination about the use value of their work, they have to contend with that and unlearn that notion that what they have to say and how they have to say it is always inevitably wrong, and relearn how to engage with the work of writing in ways that have meaning and value to them that are useful to them. Where they have agency and get to define the terms for what counts as good writing. In some way, I think that to begin with the *What Makes Writing Good?* assignment—the dialogues, and to end with the funk it up assignment requires the in-between.

We talk about how it is that we have learned such a dysfunctional notion: That what we have to say and how we have to say it is inevitably wrong. Not only is it inevitably invariably wrong, it's wrong because we are not the people that we should be. We're not performing our subject position in a way that's dutiful and obedient. What they've been taught to think of their own writing and their agency with regard to their writing is invested with sticky stories about who they are, who they're capable of being, and who they should be, that are dysfunctional maybe at best, and at worst, oppressive. Right?

Shane to Frankie Condon: What's the most entrenched resistance that you've experienced as a teacher-scholar who is doing antiracist work? [Episode 28: 14:24–17:36]

The most entrenched resistance has seemed to me to be driven by the fear of White folks. That fear from my

perspective had in large part to do with a worst-case-scenario thinking. So if I do this work from my position as a writing center director, I'll get fired. Or the provost won't like me anymore. Or the teachers won't send their students to the writing center anymore. Or people won't like me anymore. This was many years ago, Beth Godbee and Moira Ozias and I did an antiracism workshop before a Midwest Writing Centers Association conference. They had a workshop day, like CCCC does, and we did a half day antiracism workshop. What was really interesting to me about that workshop was a moment when we asked participants to reflect on, "What prevents you from starting antiracism work? What prevents you from trying?"

To the best of my recollection, I think there were two women of color in that workshop and all the rest were White women. All of the White women talked about these fears: "People won't like me. My writing center is already marginalized in my institution. What if it gets more marginalized?" Two women of color in the workshop talked about fears for the safety of their children, experiences with lynchings, both literal and metaphorical. I often think that White people don't start or they resist because they're living a failure of their imagination to see a world beyond the impossible. I think the problem of, "What if I lose what little power I have?" is an extraordinary piece of resistance, and a place where people really get stuck.

Shane to Asao B. Inoue: You approach writing assessment through a social justice-based framework by problematizing traditional standards and values on judging language. Can you talk about this work? [Episode 12: 05:15–08:23]

At least in the contemporary university setting, traditional writing assessment standards and values were created around the late nineteenth century. In that time, there was really only one demographic going to college: White males. In the United States, and again . . . we're talking about the United States university system that was migrated from

Europe, the German university system. There is one group of homogenous students . . . all we have to do is look at some of the really good histories written in our field about the origins of literacy assessments that get students into college. I'm thinking about the origins of the SAT, for instance. What were they looking for at the turn of the century? They were looking for students who had read the kind of books that those Harvard and Yale college professors had read and felt were important to know. Why would they think it's important to know? Not because it offered them some way to think or whatever. It offered them certain dispositions in life. Certain ways to be distinguished as a human being.

We can have all the social critiques we want of that. But ultimately, when you're grading student performances, literacy performances, based on something like that or based on "Here's what I think the quality of that is and I'm going to rank it," you're doing a similar thing as they did before. You're saying how close are you to me, the teacher and my background. I don't think most of the time when I walk into a classroom that my students come remotely from the places that I came from and from the kinds of background that I came from. A few do, but most of them don't. That's good for them and good for me. So we need to find ways and grading systems that help us get away from just simply reproducing ourselves.

I think *problematic* is the right word. I'm thinking about [Paulo] Freire's notion of a problematic—that which is both social and idiosyncratic. Meaning it's of the individual. It's a system that is problematic because it's necessarily part of my biases. I make judgments based on my biases. But it's also where do I get those from? Where are the boundaries and limits that give me those, the history? It's the social aspects of my life in history and in education and in my classrooms that I gather from that give me the boundaries to let me make certain kinds of judgments and have certain kinds of biases. It's truly problematic. I like to

replace problematic or put a slash over that and say problematic is also a *paradox*. Yeah, that's true. It's also not true. Or there's elements of those things that are good or bad in this given situation. It's *probabilistic*, if you will.

Shane to John Duffy: How does ethics inform your approach to teaching writing? [Episode 11: 01:59–04:55]

We have a sort of grand tradition, the rhetorical inheritance, and we work towards citizenship and the good community and so forth. I just began asking myself, given the work we do, we seem so disconnected from the reality of public discourse, even though we're teaching things that should be influencing public discourse. So that was one question. Why was that true? Then, the other question was what might we be doing that we're not doing now? I want to stress that that's a hard question to answer because I think that the work that we're doing now is so good. I mean, I really do. You look from program to program and you look at the scholarship and it's so impressive. But it did seem to me that the more I read, the more I started to think about the role of ethics in the teaching of writing.

Not that we should be teaching ethics, but it seemed to me that we were already teaching ethics. We were teaching practices of ethical discourse but we weren't naming those practices. They were implicit in what we were doing. Now, I don't mean that there wasn't a single person or teacher or program doing that. I mean, in general, if you look at our scholarship, there's not a lot of attention paid to ethics. We've embraced Aristotle's rhetoric and we've mostly ignored Aristotle's ethics. So I started to look into that, and to see how that might inform my work here at Notre Dame as a writing program administrator, but also what it might have to say in the field.

Shane to John Duffy: In "The Good Writer," you write, "As teachers of writing, we are always already engaged in the teaching of rhetorical ethics, and that the teaching of writing necessarily and

inevitably moves us into ethical reflections and decision-making.” Can you talk more about what you mean by rhetorical ethics, and how teachers are always inevitably teaching practices of ethical communication? [Episode 11: 04:56–10:25]

Typically, when we talk about ethics, there are two traditions in the West that have been dominant, the so-called Big Two. One is deontology, which is the ethics of obligation, the idea that there are certain things that are categorically and indisputably right and indisputably wrong. So for example, torture. We might say that that is categorically wrong and should never be done. The most famous practitioner of this is Immanuel Kant, who talked about the categorical imperative, which was the sort of thing like if you would will it for everybody under all conditions, then it is categorically imperative. The other tradition is consequentialism of the ethics of outcomes, where you try to base moral decisions on what is going to promote the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number of people. And I have argued that both of those traditions have influenced the way we teach writing.

When we teach students, historically, when we’ve taught students about grammar, when we’ve taught students about usage rules, that’s often framed categorically, right? These are the rules, and if you break them, if you violate them, you are doing something wrong. You’re an error. We’ve also been influenced, I think, by consequentialist ethics, in the sense that we rank students, we grade their papers, we create consequences, and we base the goodness of a writing assignment or a task or product on how well it promotes a good consequence. So those traditions have been prevalent in our classrooms, again, mostly implicitly. But it seemed to me that neither of those really captured the ethical dimensions of our work. I started to think in terms of practices, like what do our practices tell us about ethics?

The example that I’ve used many times is, in an argument, when we teach students to write a claim, we are presuming

or there is an assumption that in making that claim the students are going to be truthful. That they're not going to make claims that are knowingly dishonest. Because if they do, their arguments won't be successful, for the most part. I mean, you can always think of exceptions. But similarly, when we teach students all the things we teach about evidence, about its sufficiency, its adequacy, its relevancy, we are in a sense teaching them to be accountable. We're saying that you have to be able to stand up and defend the claims you make or substantiate the claims you make.

The final example that I use is when we teach students that they need to look at alternative points of view, if only to address those points of view, we're teaching practices of intellectual open-mindedness, intellectual generosity, and intellectual courage. Because it's hard to read people you fundamentally disagree with and read them to the end and try to really think about their arguments. But this is what we're asking students to do. So those things: truthfulness, accountability, open-mindedness, courage, they're part of another ethical tradition. That's tradition of the virtues. When I talk about ethics, I'm talking about the kind of ethics that moral philosophers call *virtue ethics*. It's rooted in Aristotle, it's rooted in Confucius before Aristotle. We are teaching practices. In those practices, inherent in those practices, are what I would call *rhetorical virtues*. When I say rhetorical virtues, I simply mean the discursive enactment of virtue.

Shane to Cruz Medina: Your teaching intersects digital writing and multicultural rhetoric. Can you talk about how social justice and digital writing and multicultural rhetoric come together in your classroom? [Episode 24: 02:12–05:49]

Sure, so I think the connection between digital writing and multicultural rhetoric for me goes back to James Berlin and thinking about the idea of the social epistemic and thinking always how when we're writing we're never really disconnected from the cultural influences or the

knowledge in a specific geographic space that we're writing in. Even when we're composing in digital spaces, they're still informed by this cultural knowledge or traditions that are happening.

I'm someone who's used a blog for more than ten years. What I found was, there was certain *traditions* . . . it was Natalie Martinez's video she created that really inspired me for the idea of the *digital testimonio*. I could kind of see that tradition she was borrowing from. As much as we want to say there's a certain neutrality for some of these digital platforms, we can definitely see that how we're using them is informed by rhetorical traditions that we come from or that we value. I've really been pushing for students to think a lot more about bringing in their own images or video or things that they're creating. There's a very tangible way for them to be thinking about these multimodal projects. So it's a lot to always say how are we going to teach multicultural rhetoric because you're including a lot of different traditions in that. I think if they can come away with at least a few bits of those kinds of ways of approaching their critical thinking and writing, that's all I can hope for.

Shane to Cruz Medina: In *Racial Shorthand*, you write about the importance of examining online spaces and media because “racist discourse about, and threats against, non-whites continue to circulate in social media due to the fact that users believe they are hidden (or hooded) by cyber-anonymity.” Can you talk about this complex relationship between social media and social justice? [Episode 24: 10:58–15:31]

I think in the collection Miriam F. Williams . . . does the best job in thinking about the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and how that created its own sort of platform or connective space. That once folks were using the hashtag they were able to connect. I think going back to the mind space I was probably in working on that years ago, there was a lot of hope in terms of thinking about how a lot of these social media platforms felt maybe a

little more neutral, or felt just like these writing tools. I think it kind of went with that same hope at the time when like Yancey and Andrea Lunsford in *Writing Matters*, that we're writing more and writing in all these different places and students are texting, and this is great. I think in part of that message is like, "No, this is good. We can leverage these platforms in a way that they can really be just like any other kind of writing in their own sort of . . . how we're deciding to use them."

That's kind of the double-edged sword a little bit. I think what was really encouraging was they provided these spaces for writing and reflection, critical thinking, and then, of course, action. When you're thinking about it, I think a lot of people who might be isolated activists in terms of rights for different groups, and they don't feel like they're around those groups in different places, social media gives them that opportunity to connect with others. So that they're not feeling isolated necessarily. Or they can see maybe when they're gaslighted in their own communities in terms of telling people that these are issues, and other people just kind of dismissing them away.

Then a couple years ago when Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* came out, she sort of drew attention to a lot less of the neutrality in these online spaces. Raising the question of, "Why is it that we're getting these certain search results?" That really raised a question as we went through the election in 2016. We started to see the influence of things like bots and realizing that these spaces weren't as neutral or protected or altruistic or democratic that we thought. These certain algorithms rank and promote certain kinds of tweets or videos on YouTube that can very much work against social justice practices by spreading misinformation and sort of continuing the wrong dominant narratives.

Shane to Cecilia Shelton: In your article "Shifting Out of Neutral," you talk about using Black feminist pedagogy as a means for equity and social justice in technical and professional communication.

Can you talk more about how this framework disrupts traditional norms and genre expectations? [Episode 39: 05:50–08:23]

It takes a different stance than a traditional Eurocentric masculinist kind of approach to pedagogy where lived experience isn't a valuable kind of evidence, where it's necessary to feign this distance between your emotion and the object, or the topic of your inquiry. A Black Feminist epistemology and pedagogy invites students to value lived experience, to think about their personal expressiveness, to think about personal accountability, to think about ethics, think about people. It's important to ask students not to only think about the business context and the objects and the topics that we typically discuss when we're talking about business and technical communication, but to also think about who are the people in these environments? Who are our colleagues? Who are the publics that we're serving? Who are our supervisors? Our customers?

Usually, that sort of figure in a student's mind is sort of a stick figure. But if we were to add flesh and bones to that stick figure, and not interrogate that, that stick figure would turn into a White, cisgender heterosexual man who's middle-class and educated. Right? That means something. I try to invite students to think about other people and to think about the ways that emails and reports and policies and documentation they're composing also compose the environments and the context that other people live and work and play and consume within those contexts.

DENOUEMENT

A social justice-based approach to teaching writing situates the writing class as a site for inquiry and investigation. It seeks to interrogate how systems and structures privilege some and oppress others. Social, political, economic, and cultural norms ultimately help establish power and hierarchies. Teachers who embrace a social justice-based approach are committed to challenging and resisting these cultural norms that reproduce biases. Through this, the class becomes a space for critical reflection on how power is situated

and constructed through and within systems and policies. No system is neutral. No structure or classroom practice is fully objective. Thus, social justice pedagogy reimagines the writing classroom and critiques exclusionary practices. Social justice pedagogies seek to establish more equitable practices and policies.

For example, a social justice approach resists departmental outcomes and classroom practices that uphold notions of standardized English, which are linked to whiteness. A social justice approach understands all language practices, dialects, and patterns are valuable meaning-making habits and activities for learning. Further, through the lens of writing program administration, a social justice approach confronts placement tests that disproportionately affect students of color. A social justice framework for teaching focuses on equity and uses classroom curriculum, readings, assignments, and assessments to value students' identities, languages, histories, cultures, and communities.

The following questions can be used to think more intentionally about this approach:

- Who are traditional writing classroom pedagogies and practices privileging? And what assumptions and biases are present in these constructions? What racial and linguistic identities are being disadvantaged within those assumptions and constructions?
- How can we invite and facilitate conversations on race, language, and power in first-year writing? Through what theories and practices (e.g., critical race theory)?
- How are we listening to students' lived experiences? How are we fostering student agency and dismantling hegemonic power?
- How are we paying attention to our local communities and the issues around us in order to better teach reading, writing, and other literacies?
- Whose voices and experiences are being amplified through readings and materials? Who's voices and experiences are absent and/or being silenced?
- In what ways can we rewrite departmental and classroom policies around social justice?