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Introduction: Revising Our Practices Mindfully and Embodying Anti-Racist Pedagogy

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TEACHING WRITING NOW: DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

A virtual symposium hosted by the Texas A&M Department of English throughout the spring of 2021 that featured a series of talks and workshops on the topic of how practitioners can better teach writing now by addressing diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the writing classroom. The event was aimed at bringing together scholars doing research in social justice pedagogies, cultural rhetorics, and composition/professional writing in our rapidly changing media landscapes. Events were free and open to the public.

This issue of *Open Words*, edited by Claire Carly-Miles, Lori Arnold, and Matthew McKinney, invites you to experience, after the fact, the 2021 [“Teaching Writing Now: Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice in the Writing Classroom—A Virtual Symposium,”](#) which was co-sponsored by the Texas A&M University Department of English, the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities, and the University Writing Center (also the site of the university’s writing-in-the disciplines program). The symposium was first conceived by the Department of English Diversity Committee, chaired by David McWhirter, which was tasked with evaluating the department’s support for first-generation students. The committee found somewhat

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to their surprise that they were teaching literally thousands of first-generation students each year in their core writing courses, which include first-year composition, an introduction to writing about literature, and an introduction to technical writing. Many of those students were also from underrepresented populations. The committee also found that 25% of English majors were first-generation. With this in mind, the final committee report (issued in 2019) recommended hiring a tenure-line Director of Writing Programs to guide program development with the understanding that “a focus on the needs and challenges faced by first-generation students should be a priority for our writing programs, in terms of both curriculum development and instructor preparation.” The symposium was conceived as a way to move toward those two recommendations.

In February of 2020, with the backing and guidance of Department Head Maura Ives, McWhirter convened a planning committee, to which I was invited as a professor of rhetoric and as the University Writing Center Executive Director. Also on the committee were three English faculty members with interest and expertise in writing, including Michael Collins, Sara DiCaglio, and Claire Carly-Miles, and rhetoric graduate student Lori Arnold. Like everyone else, we had to plan around Covid, which significantly delayed us, but in late January of 2021, we kicked off the event online with a panel entitled “Teaching Writing at the Border.”

From the committee’s first meeting, I knew the University Writing Center had to be involved. I am painfully aware that writing centers are implicated just as much as any other campus entity in blocking access and perpetuating linguistic and social injustice, even as we attempt on a daily basis to cultivate diversity, equity, and inclusion. Despite years of trying to improve our climate and practice to be more socially just, the Texas A&M University Writing Center has struggled to build awareness and to find solutions to the challenging problem of helping students navigate the demands of academics in English and still preserve a sense of identity and agency. We confront linguistic shame and prejudice in the everyday writing and public speaking practices that students bring to us. We have high staff turnover in that we rely on peer consultants, and we find ourselves in a constant mode of educating them. We also provide support for instructors of writing- and speaking-intensive courses on campus, which include faculty from all disciplines, many who have never even considered how academic language plays a role in promoting social injustice. We saw the symposium as at least a step forward in finding solutions and creating greater awareness around these issues. We invited faculty participation in both keynotes, and we made sure Vershawn Ashanti Young presented an action-oriented workshop for faculty, graduate

students, and writing center consultants on “Using Trilingualism in Writing Center Spaces and Consultations.”

This symposium was not conceived of as a panacea but as an essential and a necessary step toward fuller social justice in a world that privileges whiteness and white language. As we take this step toward social justice, we must be in it for the long haul and change how we move, act, and think daily. The symposium not only brought both the Department of English and the University Writing Center to a better understanding of the issues but also made us consider how to accept and embody an anti-racist mindset that will, I say with confidence and with hope, lead to revising our practices. Our opening keynote by Asao Inoue, “Not Grading Writing as Teaching Writing Now: Considerations of Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice in the Writing Classroom,” hit us hard with an argument revealing to us the true weight of a commitment to anti-racist teaching. When I invited Dr. Inoue to give this keynote, I thought he might offer concrete solutions—I believe I even asked for that. So, in the true tradition of “signifying,” he undermined my request by explaining why purely concrete and definitive solutions are impossible. To quote him from the keynote, “Anti-racist work isn’t just intellectual or structural work; it’s also emotional and bodily work that we might pay careful attention to in order to do it better and more self-consciously.” He goes on to describe the need to slow down mindfully, to pause before we inflict damage, before we commit the microaggression, to reflect as we work, as we read, as we converse, and to discover where we need to dig deeper and go further. Even as he disabused me of the notion that practical solutions would do the trick, if only I could lay my hands on them, he reinforced my instinct to orient the writing center and writing classes towards rhetorical agility and teaching the habits of mature composers rather than toward enforcing conformity to one particular variety and register of language. It was a change of orientation he offered, not a change of any given practice.

The first step for many of us, one still foreign to many academics, in English and in most disciplines, is to wake up to the fact that, as Inoue reminds us, the racially white dominant discourse “harm[s] some students and privilege[es] others.” This realization causes us to realign the purpose of assessment, away from holding performance up to a single white standard. Instead, we need to measure students’ ability to work and function as writers, and as communicators, their ability to fit the words to the context. We measure, too, their efforts. We reward them for learning to act as writers, at least in part, and not for producing perfect artifacts that demonstrate their performance of white academic writing.

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Then there's the step we must take that requires we embrace conflict, when we openly admit that the system is racist, and we interrogate terms like *success*. (Whose success? What does it look like?) Likewise, one of our presenters, Jennifer Sano-Franchini ("Programmatic Efforts to Redress Anti-Blackness in Technical and Professional Writing") challenges us in writing programs to shed our pearl-clutching ignorance of systemic racism in the academy and in our classrooms and programs. BIPOC intellectuals and activists have laid the groundwork to help us see with more honest eyes, the death of George Floyd brought it home more viscerally to many, as Sano-Franchini emphasizes:

Gone are the days when administrators could very easily deny, silence, and shroud over racism in our organizations and programs and our enactments or complicity in white supremacy—or so some of us hope. Instead, administrators are called to take action when we are found to employ self-proclaimed white supremacists and faculty who enact racism in various ways.

Applying this call to action to technical and professional communication, Sano-Franchini takes a deep dive into so-called neutral language markers like "clarity" and "appropriateness," often used to advance Eurocentric language values subtly.

There is room here to pause and, as Inoue suggests, ruminate. If I learned anything from this symposium, I learned that we cannot find practical fixes divorced from a local context and from a desire to implement an anti-racist mindset. Striving toward diversity, equity, and inclusion is ongoing and requires struggle, conflict, and dedication. There are no easy fixes to serving the underrepresented and first-generation students coming to us in good faith for an education. We can't just fix them (are they broken?), bring them up to standard (whose standard?), make them "successful" in the image of the predominantly white academy. This is not about remediation or acculturation. It's about social justice, and we have to enact anti-racist practices in our curriculum planning, in our classrooms, in our writing centers, and in our assessments.

In the Texas A&M University Writing Center, we are trying to model ways to engage with students who use the services that allow us to have meaningful conversations about their language choices—those they make, those they avoid, and those they could make. Encouraging students to do this work is risky. In the context of a predominately white southern university with a reputation for conservative values, teaching our consultants and our student clients to consider that academic norms are undergirded by white supremacist/Eurocentric language values invites conflict and

resistance. It's not enough to diversify our staff, although we have consistently worked at this important step. It's more about "un-educating" them, disillusioning them of a false narrative about language that's been hammered into them and that they have been rewarded for believing. Our student consultants often come to us loving what they learned about the English language and wedded to the concept of one stable standard, one correct variety of English they mastered to earn high marks in their writing, an English they do not recognize as white, which gives them confidence in becoming peer educators.

We are even more challenged working with faculty from across the disciplines. I recently received an email that was copied to me from our Provost's Office—a supportive email from the Associate Provost, but one in which a retired faculty member accused me of "not teaching grammar" and asking for me to be fired. What does it really mean, then, to teach grammar? What grammar are we talking about? I admit I don't teach it simply as a set of static rules one must master and practice without fail. In the writing center we teach grammar, as much as possible, in a political, social, and historical context, and as a series of rhetorical choices. That professor and I are clearly talking past each other, or, as Inoue puts it, we are "people who seem to be discussing the same topic, even agreeing generally about their purposes or goals, but really, they ain't. They're talking about different things, and it always leads to reinforcing white supremacy." As far as Inoue is concerned, I must go deeper and call out the racism here, not be safe. He goes on to say:

That's the game. Especially in schools, universities want teachers talking about breaking racist systems by not talking about race or racism, or maybe talking about a lot of other salient depressions all together, lumped in. So, instead, they talk about inclusion and valuing other ways with language, more generally. They talk about closing the achievement gaps. They talk about helping underprepared students, or disadvantaged ones, making special classes, all code words for students of color and deficit.

And, as expressed in the symposium by my colleague, Texas A&M's Michael Collins, faculty also are under great pressure to consider what leeway they can give students before they actually impede their progress in a white world. How much fearlessness, how much art, can the student writer bring to essays responding to a typical academic prompt? It's a great question. More important, Collins warns us of the dangers of exoticizing BIPOC writers. One of my answers to that question, however, is that we teach rhetorical and linguistic fluency, or, as Vershawn Ashanti Young espouses, code

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meshing. We teach why and how languages and language varieties are stigmatized, how users have been punished or shamed, how language prejudice is a form of violence and racism. There is no need to pressure students into using one form of language. There is a need to teach them to use language with awareness and art. There is also a need to teach our English teachers, kindergarten through college, some basic linguistics.

The panels in which Collins participated—“Teaching Writing across the English Department Curriculum” and “Workshopping a Social Justice Pedagogy”—both reveal the thoughtful ways the Texas A&M English faculty and graduate students are considering and confronting equity and social justice in writing classrooms, while also illuminating what hinders them. Most of the panelists are not currently teaching first-year composition, which may reflect the department’s lack of a tenured Writing Program Director able to encourage our newest doctoral students to share their expertise. There was one presentation by a first-year composition instructor, whose background in writing centers gives her confidence in her own expertise: Gwendolyn Inocencio explains how she guides students by providing low-stakes practice, reflection, and targeted action informed by extensive feedback. Her article’s focus is on fostering student voices in college writing.

In our more advanced classes, or in classes where the focus is writing about literature, work on moving away from a static view of language and attention to diversity, equity, and social justice is visible. For example, Marian Eide, a highly experienced professor in the department, describes her turn to a pedagogy that foregrounds metacognition in a way that fosters student exploration of their half-formed thoughts. Students claim ownership over assignments, rather than being held to tired academic genres. Regina Mills, Marcela Fuentes, Hyunjung Kim, Janet Cho, and C. Anneke Snyder all explore busting out of the academic essay genre in ways that better engage their students as rhetorically fluid writers exploring language diversity and developing rhetorical fluency. Landon Sadler and Allison Estrada-Carpenter discuss how to create a safe classroom where students can take risks and fully engage, while Edudzi Sallah describes the real danger when we neglect being accessible to a diverse student body. Matthew McKinney subverts traditional theories of style in an advanced rhetoric course by inviting undergraduate students to “draw on their own understanding of how they identify with being American or with American culture” and thus opening up many avenues by which they can examine rhetorical style not as many may conceive it, through a Strunk and White lens of “how you should write” or through edicts like “be clear and concise” and “never use the passive voice.” Rather

they examine style through a sociopolitical, historical lens, demystifying the notion many hold about there being one best way to write.

In the Texas A&M Department of English, recent hires and searches in rhetoric have stressed the need to address diversity and, as the reports of the departmental Diversity Committee put it, to “begin developing initiatives aimed at creating a positive campaign around first-gen identity and accomplishment,” recognizing that these initiatives should not stigmatize first-generation students, and that they are of benefit to all students (McWhirter et al., 2019, p. 7). They include programs that improve advising and access to instructors, mentoring, and reducing course costs by, for example, creating open-access resources. Perhaps most relevant to the symposium, however, is the commitment to provide pedagogical education regarding the needs of first-gen students:

We recommend offering an annual presentation/workshop about such resources to all instructors, which would include tips for recognizing and assisting struggling first-generation students. A unit on working with first-generation students, preferably developed by a tenure-line Director of Writing Programs, should be included as a required part of . . . training and the graduate pedagogy course. (McWhirter et al., 2019, p. 5)

This is a call that can be read in different ways, again reiterating how Inoue asks us to reflect and check if we are on the same page. What do we mean here? Do we mean how to teach basic writers, perhaps making assumptions about who first-generation students are? And, if so, does that mean teaching them to conform to standard, academic English? It worries me that the first-generation label, widely adopted at our institution, plays into an institutional whitewash or ignorance about race or about linguistic shame and prejudice. Calling racism out brings conflict we administrators wish to avoid and even are pressured to avoid.

Our symposium panelists did not shy away from naming the problem as white supremacist language practices as well as systemic racism. “Teaching Writing at the Border” brought together Laura Gonzales from the University of Florida (“Ni de Over Here, Ni de Allá: Bilingual Professional Language Practices on the Mexico/US Borderland”); Victor J. Del Hierro, also from the University of Florida, with roots in Texas and with an English MA from Texas A&M University (“Culturally Sustaining Border Pedagogy”); and Randall W. Monty and Marlene Galván from The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (“You’re Not Listening, or I’m Not Saying It Right: Reflecting on Borderland as Method”). While these scholars affirm the dignity and value of all language varieties, they also bring attention to the practices that have

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stigmatized and demonized bilingual languages, pressures coming from both standardized Spanish and English, and educational practices that seek to eradicate, often through both literal and figurative violence, difference. They raise the question of what it means to claim that an institution is “Hispanic serving” and the often missionary zeal to acculturate that attends this label. The borderland resists easy solutions such as the neoliberal impulse to flatten out differences and avoid conflict, an impulse that stems from a desire to maintain dominant power and impose dominant ideology. Most pertinent to us as educators, this impulse results in an effort to police and patrol language. How, these scholars ask, do we reimagine borderland education in a way that affirms rather than denies the language practices, ideologies, and cultures of the border?

Likewise, the panel on “Social Justice Matters in Technical and Professional Communication” challenges us in departments of English to take a closer, harder look at our more advanced writing courses and to rethink what kind of English we really want to teach. The panel brought together Sue Hum from the University of Texas at San Antonio (“Mentoring Visual Ambassadors to Advocate for Social Justice: Knowledge-Telling and Knowledge-Construction”); Natasha N. Jones from Michigan State University (“Citation Practices: Shifting Paradigms”); and Jennifer Sano-Franchini from Virginia Tech University (“Programmatic Efforts to Address Anti-Blackness in Technical and Professional Writing”). The long-held idea that technical and professional communication can and should be neutral is just another way to enforce white language practices, another form of what Jones, focusing on the role of citation, identifies as silencing. All three presenters suggest ways to introduce anti-racist practices into our writing classes and programs, and all three acknowledge that this is hard, local work with no easy fixes. Hum and Jones also ask us to question whose voices we hear, whose forms of knowledge-making are valued and amplified, and whose are ignored, disregarded, disrespected.

We ended the symposium by interviewing Vershawn Ashanti Young about social justice as it related to language in a session titled “Teaching Writing after George Floyd.” The interview was conducted partly by me but mostly by Florence Davies, the Assistant Director of the University Writing Center. Ironically, I am a cisgender heterosexual white female but also a first-generation college student, while Davies, the daughter of a math professor, is a Black woman and a first-generation American of Sierra Leonean parents. For me, there’s irony in knowing our institution’s recent efforts to support first-generation students would support me while not supporting my colleague of color.

In the interview, the talk touched on who's responsible for doing anti-racist work and how this work cannot come down to pat formulas and simple fixes. Young, like Sano-Franchini, responded to the then-current climate of white "astonishment" at what Blacks have suffered:

It's hard to believe that white people do not have some palpable recognition of the plight, the ongoing situation, and the discourse that has not discontinued but has continued in various periods since the enslavement and reconstruction and segregation and post segregation, and it's just hard to believe it just seems difficult. So, part of my work in those conversations has been not just trying to help my friends and colleagues understand better, but trying to prod them to do the work that they should be doing anyway on an everyday basis to align their minds and souls and hearts to the plight of other peoples.

Davies points out how this anti-racist work, especially work about literacy and education, is pushed onto people of color who, called to testify and to argue, can be exhausted, drained. As Young explains, anti-racist work is labeled as "edgy" and often seen as risky, something I also heard when I worked in the late 1980s and early 1990s on African American English. I was warned that I was sticking my neck out and asking for criticism by working on African American rhetoric and language. It wasn't just that I was white, but even more that in composition circles (not in linguistics), asserting value beyond Standard English was controversial. Thus, it means everything to me that Young has continued this conversation so bravely and so boldly and in ways more nuanced than I could have managed.

Young also makes the point that educators tend to be blind to the connections between the fates of George Floyd and Sandra Bland, and the white supremacist ideology deployed in their classrooms. As Davies says, Sandra Bland was not able to "just have a bad day." Her reaction to a bad day was read as defiance, non-compliance—if only she'd complied with Waller County law enforcement, she'd have been safe. But she talked back. She protested. And that's how they could justify arresting her and all the terrible consequences that followed. Young wants us to think about this: Black people can't be Black in public places.

This brings us to question our pedagogy—do we ask our students to adopt what he calls "other people's English"? Do we insist they code switch? Or do we allow them to code mesh and to use their own sense of language and style to create rhetorically effective and appropriate writing? Rather than create barriers, he reminds

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us, we ought to create opportunities and let students bring to the task any resources at their disposal. This, I believe, is what writing centers and writing classrooms need to learn. Don't be afraid of African American English or Black English. Let others be and let yourself listen so you can hear even when you are challenged—that's what resonates with Young. Don't perpetuate linguistic myths about what is "appropriate" or "authentic." A good dose of basic linguistics and a history of world Englishes that does not focus solely on England should be added to education for teachers of literacy. A realistic view of language is more important than spending time on how to teach the rules of grammar or the correct citation style. I trust this volume will demonstrate the point.

Reference

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About the Author

Valerie Balester, Assistant Provost for Undergraduate Studies, is a professor of English and the Executive Director of the University Writing Center and the Academic Success Center at Texas A&M University. Balester contributed "How Writing Rubrics Fail: Toward a Multicultural Model" (2017) to *Race and Writing Assessment* (Eds. Asao B. Inoue and Mya Poe) and co-authored "Assessing the Information Literacy Skills of First-Generation College Students" (2021) with Sarah LeMire, Zhihong Xu, LeRoy Dorsey, and Douglas Hahn (*College & Research Libraries* 82.5. 730-54).

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