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### Advocating for Social Justice: Knowledge Telling and Knowledge Construction in an Infographic Assignment<sup>1</sup>

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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.

#### Social Justice Matters in Technical and Professional Writing

Delivered Monday, February 22, 2021, from 2:30 pm – 4:30 pm.

The undergraduate students in a technical writing course are asked to identify an infographic that addresses issues of race and inclusivity and to discuss the success to which that infographic's design strategies tackle difference. In a response to an example infographic posted by his classmate, a student critiques the infographic that compares the demographics of the US population with the demographics of worker representation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. That student points out that this comparison, a false one in his opinion, positions

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<sup>1</sup> Land acknowledgement: The University of Texas at San Antonio's three campuses are located on the ancestral territories of the Coahuiltecan people, indigenous stewards of this land. In addition, other American Indian communities, including the Lipan Apaches, the Tonkawas, and the Comanches, have dwelled on and traveled over these lands and territories in Central Texas.

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whites as tyrannizers. He disagrees with the premise of the infographic that unequal demographic representation in STEM is a sign of racism, sexism, and corruption; he maintains that this premise is flawed and too simplistic. This student's response engages in knowledge telling, a transactional approach to reading and learning that "involves a relatively shallow engagement, a regurgitation of content with little analysis or reflection."<sup>2</sup> His knowledge telling approach contrasts with the purpose of the discussion prompt, one of knowledge construction, an approach that underscores the ways in which data, design, and persuasion are not neutral, objective, or disinterested.<sup>3</sup> The instructors of this technical writing course sought to underscore through the infographic assignment and a related online discussion that knowledge construction involves deep engagement, is promoted by the use of various techniques, and requires open-ended questions in order to address the issue of race in two ways: how neutral, utilitarian stances elide cultural differences and how racialized inequalities and cultural exclusions are maintained in subtle ways. This student's response points both to the urgency for and challenges of augmenting a technical writing course with antiracist pedagogy.

This course, like similar courses taught across the nation, is treated by scholars, teachers, and students as a data-driven, neutral, disinterested endeavor, prioritizing workplace, professional, and business communication. The technical writing course, with its focus on quantitative literacy, needed to engage students in meaningful assignments with an explicit focus on race and racism. Recent socio-cultural movements, compounded with the inequalities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, augmented the urgency for revisions.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship urges intentional engagements with racism for the development of socially aware communicators

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of "knowledge telling," see M. Scardamalia & C. Bereiter (1987). Knowledge telling and knowledge transforming in written composition in Sheldon Rosenberg (Ed.), *Advances in applied psycholinguistics*: Vol. 2 (pp. 142–75). Cambridge UP. The use of the term "transactional approach" aligns with Dan Melzer's definition, one that identifies student writing that seeks not only to inform but also orients teachers as the primary audience and examiners of student writing; see D. Melzer (2014). *Assignments across the curriculum: A national study of college writing*. Utah State UP.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of active knowledge construction, see M. Carter (2007). Ways of knowing, doing, and writing in the disciplines. *College Composition and Communication*, 58(2), 385–418.

<sup>4</sup> In Fall 2020, I worked with four, second-year doctoral instructors, all teaching this technical writing course for the first time at the University of Texas at San Antonio, a Hispanic Serving Institution with almost 20,000 Hispanic students or 57% of the student population. These doctoral instructors—Kandice Diaz, Victoria Ramirez Gentry, Karyn Hixson, and Abby Mangel—and I worked in partnership to integrate the infographic assignment that introduced issues of race and design into the course, which was taught online, both synchronously and asynchronously. This course is a lower-division, core curriculum course that enrolls students across the university. About 22 sections, capped at 25 students, are offered annually.

capable of participating in an era of globalization.<sup>5</sup> Natasha Jones and Rebecca Walton have pointed out that the last two decades have not adequately addressed the ways in which we alleviate oppression through ethical civic action. They call for “social justice research” in technical communication, an approach that “investigates how communication, broadly defined, can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced” (242).<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on redressing inequities begins with addressing silences and identifying opaque structures to develop frameworks better suited to promoting cultural competencies. After all, as Jennifer Sano-Franchini reminds us, “there are no quick or easy solutions that will instantly ‘eradicate’ the deeply embedded systemic, social problem of racism” (43).<sup>7</sup> She proposes the use of a culturally reflexive framework in design, one that foregrounds complexity and a dialogic view of culture; it encourages designers to complicate race, and, by so doing, discourage and minimize racial profiling, stereotyping, and discriminatory language. By contrast, the unmediated, ahistorical, apolitical tendency in technical communication continues to embrace a utilitarian, pragmatic approach. It is in approaches like this that racism hides, in the cracks and crevices of local contexts and utilitarian approaches.

This paper details one local response to antiracist pedagogy, starting with a pilot initiative related to an infographic assignment. I highlight the mixed success and challenges of crafting a course that honors both technical writing and antiracist pedagogy goals. Following Sandra Harding’s warning against an add-and-stir approach, the doctoral instructors and I undergirded technical writing content with overt rhetorical strategies that call attention to structures that enact racism. Across eight sections, we sought to pilot difficult class conversations about race within the structure of a single assignment. Persuaded by Martin Luther King Jr.’s admonition against devotion to order to maintain a negative peace, we opted to embrace the tension that comes from striving for the presence of justice.<sup>8</sup> King, explaining about the privilege

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<sup>5</sup> See A. M. Haas & M. F. Eble (2018). Introduction: The social justice turn in *Key theoretical frameworks: Teaching technical communication in the twenty-first century* (pp. 3–20), UP of Colorado & Utah State UP. See also “Introduction,” *Performing AntiRacist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*. Ed. Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young, UP of Colorado, WAC Clearinghouse, 2017. 3-16.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, Natasha N. and Rebecca Walton, “Using Narratives to Foster Critical Thinking About Diversity and Social Justice.” *Key Theoretical Frameworks: Teaching Technical Communication in the Twenty-First Century*, Ed. Angela M. Haas and Michelle F. Eble, UP of Colorado, Utah State UP, 2018. 241-67.

<sup>7</sup> Sano-Franchini, Jennifer. “What Can Asian Eyelids Teach Us About User Experience Design? A Culturally Reflexive Framework for UX/I Design.” *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization*, 10.1 (October 2017): 27-53.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963.

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of complacency with the status quo, describes “the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” Recognizing that a status-quo, utilitarian approach to technical writing engages in what Joyce E. King calls “dysconscious racism,” “a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges” (135),<sup>9</sup> we initiated this pilot intervention as a first step toward cultivating antiracist goals in a technical writing course.

By introducing undergraduates to the relevance of race and by taking an explicit stance in discussing the ways in which design choices overtly and covertly contribute to racial inequity and social injustice, these doctoral instructors advocated for social justice in their technical writing curriculum. As teachers, they invited students to participate and contribute to antiracist efforts, even while knowing that some students might resist. In addition to content changes, we designed support assignments, resources, and activities for students to engage openly with each other’s racial experiences even as they acknowledged their own positionality. The pedagogical mechanism of change is the infographic, framed as knowledge construction rather than knowledge telling. The goal is to forge in students a desire to build knowledge in communicating for racial justice and participating in a collective responsibility by using the multimodal dynamism of the infographic as their communication of choice.

### **The Infographic Assignment**

The infographic assignment tasks students with selecting and reading a statistics-based article that provides a deep dive into a topic. The source is the PEW Research Center, a non-partisan fact tank that informs the public about issues, attitudes, and trends through public-opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis, and other data-driven social science research. Relying on the data provided by PEW, students are encouraged to create an evidence-based argument for a specific action and to communicate that action to an audience within a particular rhetorical situation. Students, habituated to the superficial, transactional approach of knowledge telling, seldom move beyond accurate summary and paraphrasing, even though they are provided with examples and resources of how to engage in knowledge construction. In addition, to augment awareness of diversity, students read about race and design, analyze an example of an infographic dealing with race and incarceration, and

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<sup>9</sup> King, Joyce E. “Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers.” *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60.2 (1991): 133-46.

contribute to a discussion that explores race and design explicitly.<sup>10</sup> These resources introduce students to the genre of the infographic, along with its design conventions, as well as underscore the importance of knowledge construction.

Before designing their own infographics, students engage in discussion to consider how these design conventions may in turn enact racial injustice. The assigned readings offer students some avenues to explore the ways design can ameliorate systemic inequity. These include layout, color, composition, line, symbols, typography, and interactivity, among other elements. In addition, students were prompted to consider the relationship between design and racialized tropes. Such processes encouraged students to think critically and inclusively about the ways in which design decisions in infographics may participate in making some readers feel unwelcome, alienated, or marginalized. In brief, this infographic assignment is designed to help students learn to read and produce data-driven visual arguments for social justice.

As one might imagine, the content and the more overt processes of addressing race resulted in uneven and sometimes challenging experiences for the doctoral instructors. Even though an instructor's identity has a direct impact on the outcome of a course, it is rarely addressed in the classroom. For example, might these doctoral instructors engage in what Romeo García and Yndalecio Isaac Hinojosa call "strategic neutrality," defined as "epistemic and performative pedagogical practices (rather than civil disobedience), which can be drawn from and grounded in epistemic violence" (208).<sup>11</sup> This approach allows instructors to acknowledge the ways in which friction represents a means to engage a range of responses, including forms of resistance, from students.

Student reactions to this pilot intervention, addressed in this paper, fall into three groups of responses. First, some students' positive approaches were marked by an uncritical embrace of diversity, where racial differences hover at the surface level. This stance provides cover for an active avoidance of discussions of systemic racism, along with a failure to interrogate white privilege and institutional exclusions. By this, I mean that students expressed the belief that diversity is valued, and that people should be treated equally. However, this belief is just the first step in an embrace of

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<sup>10</sup> For example, see Erika Kim, "[Depicting Race in Iconography](#)," and Lindsay Stuart's, "[How the United Nations Uses Icons to Help Support Humanitarian Efforts Around the World](#)." A discussion question on design and race focused on Jason Killinger's "[Educate vs. Incarcerate](#)" infographic, and his [bibliography](#), available as a google document.

<sup>11</sup> García, Romeo, and Yndalecio Isaac Hinojosa. "Encounters with Friction: Engaging Resistance through Strategic Neutrality." *On Teacher Neutrality: Politics, Praxis, and Performativity*. Ed. Daniel P. Richards. Utah State University Press, 2020. 207-220.

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racial equity with the goal of enacting social justice. Students might be encouraged to consider the ways in which design of infographics enacts structural racism at the local level. For example, the choice to italicize Spanish words or avoid the use of Spanglish endorses an othering.

Second, another set of student responses involved “whataboutism,” which seeks to redirect attention away from race and racism, for example by creating a false equivalency of exclusion of minorities with exclusions of whites. Even as Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds us of the intersectional dynamic of oppressions,<sup>12</sup> these students broaden the discussion to include other oppressions, inevitably shifting the focus and the blame for inequality. By so doing, the nature of oppression becomes too general, widespread, and thus unaddressable. I am not dismissing issues of gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and so forth. Rather, I am highlighting the potential paralysis that occurs when students are faced with generalized systemic exclusions. It is difficult for students to contextualize these systems of oppression within racially minoritized communities. Thus, students’ design choices might focus on local contexts as they are encouraged to become more knowledgeable about the concerns of their stakeholder audiences.

Third, as expected, some students expressed resistance and frustration, engaging actively in class discussion boards. Although they wrote extensively about issues of race, their perspectives underscored polarization or an either-or binary. Some students also tended to reduce racism to a single source, whether microaggressions, implicit bias, or institutional racialization. These reductive approaches diminished the complexity and dynamism of race-related concerns and tended to take the form of accusations and/or blaming. By contrast, other students might feel called out and become defensive. Alternatively, they might counter accusations with personal attacks, thus shutting down conversation. To be antiracist advocates, doctoral instructors must learn not only to engage in the tension, resistance, and raw intensity of emotion, but also to facilitate conversations about difficult topics. Any success in integrating inclusive approaches to curriculum requires an antiracist treatment of knowledge construction.

### **Antiracist Knowledge Construction in the Infographic**

Knowledge creation is not value neutral but is contextual, always already culturally situated so that design decisions are interpellated with existing cultural knowledges,

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<sup>12</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberlé W., *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. The New Press, 2017.

organizing logics, and hegemonic understandings. Infographics--the output of knowledge construction--are inherently rhetorical, and therefore interested, bias-laden visual artifacts that contain both explicit and implicit arguments. The implicit arguments depicted in infographics may consist of many seemingly minor decisions about data and design, from the inception of a research project through to the final publication of the infographic. Select visualization formats, design decisions, and numerous other choices made within the infographic all frame and direct the possible range of interpretation. Furthermore, infographics may reflect underlying biases, ideologies, and beliefs that in turn structure and reproduce past inequities and harmful realities.

The pedagogy on the infographic does not currently integrate important critical practices for social justice. For example, infographics are assumed to be an impartial medium that enact the functional work of displaying information. This illusory functionalism may obscure an understanding of the ways in which design performs structural racism. Because infographics are a compelling and resonant medium through which much contemporary communication is represented, this intervention is particularly timely. The rhetorical qualities of the infographic underscore persuasive purposes of individual design decisions or visual conventions that allow for mitigating or reinforcing racial inequality and social inequity.

Even as students grapple with quantitative literacy and the strategies for data visualization, they might be exposed to the work of visual theorist Johanna Drucker. Drucker argues that the standard visualization conventions with which we are most familiar—bar graphs, line charts, pie charts—were constructed in European countries to manage the resources garnered from colonial expansion and industrial transformation.<sup>13</sup> Such visualizations were “created to track demographics, trade, war, and debt, incurred by their growing empires”<sup>14</sup> so that their purposes are imbued with imperialism and conquest.

At the same time, traditional, value-neutral approaches to knowledge construction warrant a rationalistic epistemology, which constitutes another form of oppression. For instructors to engage in knowledge construction, they frequently present the dominant view of knowledge, which is an amalgam of rational, experiential, communal, and evidence-based practices. This rational stance often requires of instructors a neutrality that eschews the epistemic violence that cultural rhetoric has

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<sup>13</sup> Drucker, Johanna. “Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display.” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5.1 (2011):

<sup>14</sup> Hepworth, Katherine, and Christopher Church. “Racism in the Machine: Visualization Ethics in Digital Humanities Projects.” *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 12.4 (2018): 1-16.

highlighted. Neutrality, as Bernadette Longo reminds us, does not account for the struggles for knowledge legitimation that are influenced by larger cultural, institutional, political, economic, and/or social relationships, pressures, and tensions.<sup>15</sup> Recent work has challenged that rational-capitalist epistemology. Iris Ruiz and Damian Baca offer us decolonial options for pedagogy.<sup>16</sup> Cruz Medina applies Walter Mignolo's "epistemic disobedience" by complicating the primacy of English as a language for knowledge building.<sup>17</sup> And Rebecca Walton, Kristen Moore, and Natasha Jones advocate building on Patricia Hill Collins' black feminist epistemology as a framework for community-based teaching.<sup>18</sup> Antiracist pedagogy challenges the objective, apolitical, utilitarian, and pragmatic impulses of technical communication in general and the infographic in particular.

As the doctoral instructors and I revisit the infographic assignment and seek to extend antiracist pedagogy to other portions of technical writing, we maintain three dominant principles. The first is to situate race locally by helping students revisit what they know and embrace ways of experiencing the new. The second requires an overt recognition of the stereotypes, tropes, and frames of race that shape our design choices in order to apply them appropriately and creatively. The third is an embrace of multilingualism and linguistic diversity through functional and critical analyses.

At the heart of an antiracist pedagogy is the belief in universal equality and equity. The classroom remains a site that is capable of sparking a revolution or reproducing structural inequities. Despite these mixed successes, and despite the vocal protests of some students, like the undergraduate I described at the beginning of my paper, the doctoral instructors and I reject a negative peace. Rather, we recognize that the next generation of students benefits from our commitment and efforts to shape a positive peace. Antiracist pedagogy is forged by friction and resistance, and the stressors that come from thinking, acting, teaching, and theorizing are critical to our future.

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<sup>15</sup> Longo, Bernadette. "An Approach for Applying Cultural Study Theory to Technical Writing Research." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 7.1 (1998): 53-73.

<sup>16</sup> Ruiz, Iris, and Damián Baca. "Decolonial Options and Writing Studies." *Composition Studies* 45.2 (2017): 226-229, 269, 272.

<sup>17</sup> Medina, Cruz. "Decolonial Potential in a Multilingual FYC." *Composition Studies* 47.1 (2019): 73-94.

<sup>18</sup> Walton, Rebecca, Kristen R. Moore, and Natasha N. Jones. *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action*. Routledge, 2019. 105-30.



### About the Author

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