

Anti-Racist Classroom Practices

Teaching Anti-Racist Reading Practices in First-Year Writing

Felicita Arzu Carmichael

Few in our field question that the first-year writing course is a space to theorize and practice writing and research, but, largely in response to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, many in the field also recognize that FYW is “inextricably implicated in histories of systemic racism” (CWPA, 2020). Building on scholars who demand for our field to reassess our oppressive past (Maraj, Prasad, & Roundtree, 2018) and who advocate for “inclusive and action-oriented” scholarship and pedagogy (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019), I argue that it behooves us to ensure that our pedagogy, policies, and programs create the space for FYW students to develop a keen awareness of systemic racism and social injustices; this way, students can understand their responsibility to help dismantle those racist institutionalized systems and work toward effecting positive social change.

In this essay, I share possibilities for anti-racist pedagogy in FYW through attention to the kinds of literacy practices we privilege. In the sections that follow, I first discuss my investigation of diversity and inclusive practices in my department’s FYW program. Then I demonstrate how I used that inquiry to design an assignment that teaches anti-racist reading, enacting Rembert, Harris, and Hamilton’s (2019) call for us to be anti-racist educators. I argue that teaching anti-racist reading practices in FYW promotes awareness of linguistic violence and justice in literacy practices and allows us to be purposeful and explicit about our “responsibility to implement anti-racist practices” that “actively work to dismantle structures of white privilege” (CWPA, 2020).

FYW PROGRAM INVESTIGATION

In winter 2020, I conducted an investigation into my department’s FYW program, specifically one of the general education courses.¹ The goal was to identify if and how the program was enacting inclusive pedagogy by promoting a diversity of perspectives and voices in the curricula. I paid particular attention to course syllabi, reading assignments, supplemental textbooks, and assignment descriptions for twenty-eight sections of our FYW general education course.

I recognize, as Shelton (2020) unapologetically argues, that “concepts like diversity pepper curricula” (p. 21). For this reason, I identified not only where attention to *difference* emerged but also how they were addressed through the work students were asked to do. What I learned was that explicit attention to diverse perspectives was not evident in most course materials. While I assumed that these issues emerged in instructors’ classroom pedagogy, its absence in available materials was enough to heighten my awareness about the need for our FYW courses to be more intentional and explicit about centering linguistic, cultural, and racial perspectives. To demonstrate the explicitness of centering diverse perspectives in FYW, I designed my FYW courses with social justice, diversity and inclusion as foundational course values. One assignment that shows this approach is the “Literacy, Language, and Reading Habits Forum,” assignment, which teaches anti-racist reading.

TEACHING ANTI-RACIST READING HABITS

In preparation for a research project where I asked students to use a social justice lens to generate a list of questions about a topic related to their major, one student noted to me that these issues were unrelated to their major in biomedical studies. While this student’s comment was not representative of all FYW students’, it did signal to me that students might not have had the opportunity to consider how the perspectives of minoritized populations are relevant to the goals of their field of study; thus, anti-racist lens of studying and practicing rhetorical approaches to writing must be taught. To prepare students for this project, I drew on Asao Inoue’s “Teaching Antiracist Reading” to design a forum assignment that required students to practice anti-racist reading. As Inoue (2020) persuasively puts it, when we read, we engage in language habits that are inherently tied to material social conditions. These conditions are influenced by factors such as race, class, gender, and other assumptions that likewise shape our language practices. Thus, insisting that my students engage in anti-racist reading helped them “develop a critical linguistic awareness” (Baker-Bell, 2020) that leads to recognizing and appreciating *difference* in the literature with which they engage and the work they will do beyond FYW.

This awareness is important because as Trainor (2016) reminds us, students have been conditioned to think positively, so when they read materials that involve characters who seem to not be positive, students look upon the real life and/or fictional characters negatively. In my own course, I identified evidence of Trainor’s assertion. For example, when I asked students to discuss the relationship between the author’s perspective on language and

students' own views, a student shared that white people are "not as bad" as Douglass claims in "Learning to Read and Write" because his mistress and street friends, all of whom were white, helped him to read. Moreover, in sharing how larger dominant structures informed their interaction with text, another student recognized their white and socioeconomic privileges, noting that they were "fortunate enough to have ample financial support" for their schooling, which caused them to take their education for granted. This realization shaped how they "listened" to Douglass's experiences.

While most students focused on literacy's liberatory nature, some students challenged linguistic racism and shared how these problematic structures continue to normalize monolingualism and linguistic injustice. For example, when discussing what personal and social habits helped them grapple with the text, one student who was drawn to Tan's "Mother Tongue" shared that as someone who spoke English as a second language, they sometimes feared public speaking because they might say words "incorrectly" or need to speak slowly due to their accent. Like other students in class, this student expressed pride in seeing stories they were familiar with represented in course readings. Moreover, in response to my question about memorable words, many students elaborated on emotions they felt by words such as "broken," "fractured," "freedom," "wakefulness," and "silence." Recognizing the emotional harm that imposing "Standard English" causes to minoritized bodies, one student noted "I haven't really thought about how much it would affect my everyday life if I had to only use one [variety of English]." Baker-Bell (2020) talks about the importance for students to explore their linguistic identity and the intersections of language, racial violence, and power. I saw evidence of this value in how my students assessed their own language habits.

Aside from inviting students to analyze their own reading habits, anti-racist reading also allows students to think critically about how they read their own classmates' work. For example, in reflecting on anti-racist approaches to reading, a student shared that this activity helped them be more mindful of how they conduct peer reviews, noting that their peer review of classmates' work was "highly personalized" because they "automatically assessed [the peers' drafts] based on personal, subconscious criteria" of what counts as proper word choice, grammar and sentence structure.

These examples above show that when we ask students to investigate how they come to interpret text, they have the opportunity to recognize their own biases and problematic uses of literacy. Moreover, students can develop an awareness of whiteness and a "mindset of intellectual inclusion" (Shelton, 2020, p. 21), an awareness which can lead to them recognizing when they are perpetuating linguistic racism. What these experiences also

show is that while anti-racist reading can educate, it can also empower. This empowerment is especially important for racially and culturally minoritized students, who endure the effects of racist systems whether knowingly or otherwise.

CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this assignment was for students to identify and analyze their own reading habits, including how these habits are social and structural (Inoue, 2020) and racialized (Vieira et al., 2019). I strived for students to do this work by reading the works that center the voices and perspectives of people of color in hopes that it can lead to achieving social justice (Martinez, 2020). Practically and theoretically, my academic training prepared me to navigate the FYW classroom. However, most writing programs are grounded in white language supremacy (Inoue, 2019) giving FYW oppressive roots and making it challenging for many instructors to critically engage with FYW curricula. Among these challenges included recognizing and acknowledging that anti-racist reading practices must not only educate students who are unaware of how they benefit from racist and institutionalized systems, but also empower those who bear the negative effects of these same systems. I hope that the approach I provide can inform programmatic decisions about how students study and practice writing. Within my own department, I plan to share findings of this IRB exempt study in a series of online teaching workshops to promote anti-racist reading habits programmatically.

When students leave the FYW classroom, “their writing abilities do not merely improve. Rather, their abilities will diversify along disciplinary, professional, and civic lines” (CWPA, 2019). Thus, after our conference about how the health of all humans is essential but that historically, state-sanctioned violence against the bodies of racialized populations prevent them from getting the adequate care they deserve, the biomedical major student I referenced earlier went on to write a paper on how racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately underrepresented in medicine.

REFERENCES

- Baker-Bell, April. (2020). Dismantling anti-black linguistic racism in English language arts classrooms: Toward an anti-racist black language pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 59(1), 8–21.
- CWPA. (June 23, 2020). “CWPA statement on racial injustice.” Retrieved from http://wpacouncil.org/aws/CWPA/pt/sd/news_article/308259/_PAR-ENT/layout_details/false

- CWPA. (July 18, 2019). "WPA outcomes statement for first-year composition (3.0), Approved July 17, 2014." Retrieved from http://wpacouncil.org/awks/CWPA/pt/sd/news_article/243055/_PARENT/layout_details/false
- Inoue, Asao. B. (2020). Teaching antiracist reading. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 50(3), 134–156.
- Inoue, Asao. B. (2019). Who is served, and gets served, in WPA work? In S. Perryman-Clark & C.L. Collin (Eds.), *Black Perspectives in Writing Program Administration: From Margins to the Center* (pp. 141–153). Conference on College Composition and Communication and NCTE, 2019.
- Maraj, Louis M.; Prasad, Pritha; & Roundtree, Sherita. V. (2018). #BlackLivesMatter: pasts, presents, and futures. *Prose Studies*, (40)1–2, 1–14, doi: 10.1080/01440357.2019.1668638.
- Martinez, Aja. Y. (2020) *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. NCTE.
- Rembert, Keisha; Harris, Patrick; & Hamilton, Felicia. (2019). Being an anti-racist educator is a verb. *NCTE*. Committee against racism and bias in the teaching of English. Retrieved from <https://ncte.org/blog/2019/11/being-an-anti-racist-educator-is-a-verb/>
- Shelton, Cecilia. (2020). Shifting out of neutral: Centering difference, bias, and social justice in a business writing course. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 29(1), 18–32.
- Trainor, Jennifer Seibel. (2016). A dwindling focus on whiteness. *Rhetorics of Whiteness: Postracial Hauntings in Popular Culture, Social Media, and Education*, 147.
- Vieira, Kate; Heap, Lauren; Descourtis, Sandra; Isaac, Jonathan; Senanayake, Samitha; Swift, Brenna; Castillo, Chris; Kim, Meejung Ann; Shaw-Krzus, Kassia; Black, Maggie; Oládipò, Olá; Yang, Xiaopei; Ratanapraphart, Patricia; Tiwari, Nikhil, M.; Velarde, Lisa; & West, Gordon Blaine. (2019). Literacy is a Sociohistoric Phenomenon with the Potential to Liberate and Oppress. (Re) *Considering What We Know: Learning Thresholds in Writing, Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy*.
- Walton, R., Moore, K., & Jones, N. (2019). *Technical communication after the social justice turn: Building coalitions for action*. Routledge.

APPENDIX: LITERACY, LANGUAGE, AND READING HABITS FORUM ASSIGNMENT

Overview

In working toward the social justice and inclusion digital writing research project, throughout this week you will read and respond to texts that will prepare you to engage critically with a variety of writing styles, sources and perspectives. Choose 1 of the 4 PDFs below to read and discuss with your group in this week's forum.

- "Learning to Read and Write" by Frederick Douglass

- “Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan
- “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle” by Min-Zhan Lu
- “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldúa.

Instructions Part II

As you read the text, the goal is not primarily for you to interpret the author’s arguments. Instead, the primary goal is for you to identify and describe *your own* reading habits and how these habits are social and structural. In other words, your reading of the text you choose serves as an inquiry into your own language habits and how these habits are influenced by larger dominant structural forces and influences (Inoue, 2020) such as race, gender, ableism, class, etc. You are not required to answer all the questions below; instead, select a combination of questions (at least 3) to compose a 300–350 word response. In lieu of a written response, you are welcomed to record a video/audio response and upload it to the forum. Please keep your recording to 2–3 minutes.

1. How are you experiencing this text? What are you feeling as you read? Why do you think you are experiencing it in that way?
2. What conclusions are you forming about the text based on your experience?
3. What is your perspective on language and do you see that perspective reflected in the text? In other words, do the author’s perspectives on language go against your own views or do they align?
4. How have larger dominant structures (race, gender, class, ableism, etc.) informed your interaction with this text? Indicate which structure(s) and discuss how it shaped your reading of this text.
5. What personal and social habits helped you read and understand the text? What experiences or previous knowledge about language did you rely on to help you make sense of the text?
6. In high school, (how) were the histories of languages, literatures, perspectives and/or experiences of minoritized people presented? Explain.
7. In the texts you read in high school and/or in other college courses, whose voices and perspectives were highlighted? How were these voices and perspectives presented?

8. Words we use can tell us a lot about who we are and where we come from. Explain your histories with certain words that emerged in the text. I am not looking for a dictionary definition of any word. Instead, identify what words you located in the text and or used in your own response that were memorable to you. Why did you select those words and would you rethink or rephrase any of them?

Instructions Part II

Throughout the week, visit the forum and read each of your group members' responses. Respond to no less than 2 of their posts. In your response, identify areas of similarities and/or differences with their reading habits. The goal of your response to their post is to keep the conversation going. This might take the form of offering your perspective, invoking examples, referencing an idea from the reading, especially if you selected a different text, building on another classmate's response, asking more questions, etc.

NOTE

1. This project received approval from Oakland University's IRB under protocol #RB-FY2021-267.

Felicita Arzu Carmichael is assistant professor of writing and rhetoric at Oakland University where she teaches rhetorics of race and ethnicity, contemporary issues in writing studies, and first-year writing. Her research and teaching center race, technology, inclusion, and place-embodiment in writing studies, technical communication, and cultural rhetorics. Felicity has led many workshops and presented at regional and national conferences on topics including online writing instruction, place conscious pedagogy in the writing classroom, feminist activism in online spaces, and writing program administration. Her work has appeared in *Technical Communication Quarterly*.

