

## Collaborating Toward an Anti-Racist Writing Curriculum

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Following George Floyd's murder, the majority-black city of Memphis, Tennessee, like most of the United States, took to the streets.<sup>1</sup> At the protests, we heard Black Lives Matter chants that were common across the nation, but we also heard chants unique to Memphis. One such chant, "I Am A Man," began with the 1968 Sanitation Workers' Strike that brought Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis where he was assassinated. The Memphis sound we heard in this chant and others, a sound full of rhythm and cadence, call and response, testifying and signifying, has long been a fixture of Memphis culture, heard everywhere from the blues joints on Beale Street to the first intentional African American community of Orange Mound to the University of Memphis (UofM) campus. Yet despite the reality that Black language traditions are responsible for much of Memphis's celebrated culture, such traditions were conspicuously absent from UofM's first-year writing classrooms prior to 2016.

UofM is a state school located in Memphis, Tennessee, a city with suburbs located in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, and the university has an enrollment of 22,205 students. The first-year writing program consists of a two-course sequence. An average of 2,551 students enroll in the first course in our sequence per year and an average of 2,916 students enroll in the second course per year. Eighty-seven percent of the courses in the first-year writing program are taught by graduate students and full-time instructors, and the racial demographics of these groups is not representative of UofM's student demographic, a reality we find deeply problematic and know we need to address as part of our ongoing anti-racism initiative. In 2019, UofM's student body was 50.07% White, 32.05% Black, 5.31% Hispanic, 4.25 Asian, 3.62% multi-race, with the remaining percentage identifying as Other. Currently, 65% of our TAs are white, 18.75% identify as Other, and 15.63% are Black. Seventy percent of our full-time instructors are White, 19% are Black, and 15% fall into other race categories.

Scholarship highlighting the significance of Black rhetorical traditions, dialects, and speech dates back to the late 1960s with the work of Geneva Smitherman and James Sledd. Yet despite the adoption of the *Students' Right to Their Own Language Resolution* in 1974, a 2017 study conducted by Genevieve Garcia de Mueller and Iris Ruiz demonstrated that writing programs across the nation continue to fail to investigate the intersections

of race, literacy, and power, and as a result, fail to support racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students and faculty. With this research and the local and national BLM protests in mind, the first-year writing program composed a statement in support of BLM and encouraged the University's divestment from the Memphis police in summer of 2020. In that statement, we made a commitment to redouble our efforts to craft an anti-racist first-year writing program, efforts we began in 2016 in response to earlier manifestations of the BLM movement, Vershawn Ashanti Young's scholarship, and Asao Inoue's 2016 CWPA keynote. To do this, we implemented a number of curricular and professionalization interventions including a language diversity initiative that included codemeshing workshops for instructors and TAs and the formal inclusion of African American rhetorical practices in the curriculum.

#### ENCOURAGING LANGUAGE DIVERSITY FIRST-YEAR WRITING

While our initial efforts to create an anti-racist writing program involved creating a localized, Memphis-focused curriculum that includes more diverse voices and engages students in discussions of race, power, and literacy, the TAs challenged the program (and Katie, as WPA) to do more, asking for practical ways to encourage code-meshing and language diversity in their classrooms. In response, all of our Fall 2019 professionalization meetings focused on language diversity. Drawing on the work of Vershawn Ashanti Young and Neisha-Anne S. Green, the first meeting of the academic year introduced all the TAs to code-meshing by recreating the activity Green outlines in "The Reeducation of Neisha-Anne S Green: A Close Look at the Damaging Effects of 'A Standard Approach,' The Benefits of Code-Meshing, and the Role Allies Play in this Work." The activity asks students to create a concept map with themselves in the center and the discourse communities they belong to represented by circles that intersect with this center. Green then crosses out one of the communities to illustrate the intersection of language and identity. Students' responses to this deletion help them understand the inherent violence of rejecting someone's language. Using this activity as our starting point for the semester, we encouraged TAs to recreate this exercise in their own courses and to help students think about the ways they already code-mesh and how such code-meshing might help them compose for their courses, remembering Young's points that we all code-mesh but some of our code-meshed language is considered more acceptable than others. Since the first course in the writing sequence includes a literacy narrative, students could begin codemeshing in a genre where it might feel more comfortable, particularly because stu-

dents read Young's work as well as a piece by Sandra Cicneros that merges multiple languages.

To continue encouraging language diversity, later meetings included a panel of linguists (both faculty and grad students in the English department) that considered how to respect and encourage students' home languages, including local Memphian dialects as well as the languages of international students. Other meetings invited faculty from our department's African American Literature concentration to discuss how to facilitate hard conversations about race and how to respond to student resistance. Finally, we held a meeting that invited faculty of different genders, races, nationalities, and classes to hold breakout sessions that discussed how the teacher's positionality impacted discussions of race and student-teacher interaction. Without the expertise and generosity of members from our department's different concentrations, the push to create an anti-racist writing program would have been nearly impossible; collaboration and conversation were key to our language diversity initiative.

#### INTRODUCING AFRICAN AMERICAN RHETORICAL TRADITIONS

In addition to encouraging code-meshing, we piloted the teaching of African American rhetorical traditions in the 2019–20 academic year. While the curriculum already included readings by diverse authors, it relied only on Western rhetoric to teach argumentation, with its inspiration in the Classics. Following anti-racism's pedagogical call to not only celebrate diversity but also to investigate how race is constructed and how educational systems implicitly uphold racist ideology (Barlow, 2016; Condon & Young, 2017; Gilyard, 1999; Inoue, 2015; Pimental et al., 2017), Angela used a project in Katie's research methods class to investigate Geneva Smitherman's anti-racist work and subsequently challenged the program, and particularly the second rhetorically focused course, to incorporate African American rhetorical traditions. To do this, we paired the teaching of four Black rhetorical tools (narrativizing/testifying, call and response, rhythm and cadence, and signifying) alongside Ancient Greek classics (ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos), recognizing how an enriched rhetorical toolkit could improve students' writing, as evidenced by Smitherman's twenty-year study.

Relying on the work of Smitherman, Keith Gilyard, and Adam Banks, Angela and Sylvia Barnes, a student from the African American Literature concentration, co-wrote a chapter that introduces students to the four African American rhetorical traditions listed above. Heeding Aja Y. Martinez's contention that counterstories are key in investigations of race and racism, the textbook chapter historicizes the origins of Black discourse in the U.S.

in order to help students understand how rhetorical strategies arise contextually—in response to rhetorical ecologies. Students are then challenged to utilize these rhetorical strategies in their own researched arguments. Upon completion of their first draft, students are asked to compose a reflective letter. One part of this letter asks students to address why they chose or did not choose to use Black rhetorical traditions in their argument, and since they are reflecting on a first draft, it also asks them to actively consider how using such traditions might improve certain parts of their paper when they revise. In peer review, students are directed to identify rhetorical moves associated with both Western and African American traditions. Peer reviewers are also asked to point out places where including African American rhetorical traditions could improve the author's argument. In learning about the differences between these two traditions and being challenged to use at least one rhetorical move from each tradition in their writing, students are better able to comprehend the social nature of writing while also being introduced to rhetorical tactics not afforded by classical traditions.

In Spring 2020, we conducted a survey in four first-year writing classrooms following a pilot that included instruction in Black rhetorical traditions as well as discussions and activities intended to help students code-mesh in rhetorically effective ways. Of the 68 participants who responded to the survey, 34% were White, 27% Black, 22% Hispanic, 8% Multi-Race, 6% Asian, and 1% American Indian.<sup>2</sup> Sixty percent of respondents reported their cultural rhetorics/language had not been represented in previous English courses. Yet when asked if their cultural rhetoric/language was represented in the pilot course, 81% said yes. This 41% increase indicates that by considering our city's demographics and responding in kind, we were able to develop a curriculum that represented a much larger percentage of our student body.

While students of color who do not identify as Black may not see their own cultural rhetorics valued in this curriculum, they still found value in being introduced to multiple rhetorical traditions. For example, Hira Qureshi, a journalism student who participated in the pilot, was inspired by the curriculum and wrote about how the new curriculum impacted students for a local magazine, *Memphis Mirror*. After interviewing her classmates, Qureshi's article discusses how Black students felt validated after investigating and reflecting upon Black language and its role in American culture. In her article, Qureshi quotes a peer: "A lot of the typical coursework doesn't touch on race. It doesn't really touch on a lot of the present things that we go through revolving around our skin color. So, I think [the additional curriculum] opens that door, period, for everyone to discuss it." Other students shared how not "shying away" from the discussion of

race and writing also encouraged them to use diverse cultural traditions to strengthen their work.

Our survey results indicated that we need to continue to work to ensure all 100% of students are seen and heard in our courses. While we cannot cover every rhetorical tradition in a first-year writing course, we responded to this need by adding reading responses and in-class activities to our custom textbook that ask students who may not see themselves in either of the traditions we focus on to do some research into their own cultural heritage and its rhetorical traditions. This custom textbook is also a collaboration, edited by Katie but with chapters composed by many TAs and instructors. At least at this moment, this particular kind of localized anti-racist curriculum would be impossible without that textbook. Further, without the work of the four TAs who volunteered to pilot the new curriculum and Angela's work in Katie's methods course and for her dissertation, this curricular change would have taken much longer and more students would have completed our first-year writing courses without investigating the benefits of multiple rhetorical traditions.

#### CONTINUING OUR ANTI-RACIST WORK

As any WPA can attest, our work never feels done and it almost always feels like we should be doing more. When Katie began to consult the research on how to develop an anti-racist writing program, she felt overwhelmed by how much needed to change. Yet the anti-racist writing pedagogy discussed here was implemented in steps and continues today. Making a single change or intervention each semester can and will slowly build an anti-racist program. Further, these changes were made possible through both the generosity of other faculty who donated their time and expertise and through the hard work of graduate students teaching within the program. TAs in the department encouraged the program to make language diversity, code-meshing, and anti-racist pedagogy a priority by conducting related research for their class projects. They also created anti-racist classroom practices and activities that they shared with other writing instructors who might not have the time or expertise to take on such work. This continued into the Fall 2020 semester when the graduate students in the TA training and writing pedagogy course decided to create a labor-based grading contract for their class project, taking their inspiration from Inoue and others. In our final TA meeting of the Fall 2020 semester, they shared their contract and semester timeline with the other TAs in the program and encouraged them to adapt it for their own use. Other TAs requested that a Spring 2021 professionalization session be dedicated to learning the linguistic features of Memphian

Black English so that they can better encourage the rhetorically effective code-meshing Young calls for and demonstrates in his scholarship. So while this anti-racist work—like all WPA work—never feels (or is) done, programs can start slowly, work in steps, and build momentum through collaboration. Anti-racist work is inherently collaborative, and WPAs should look to other members of their departments and ask for them to share their expertise in creating and sustaining a localized program that responds to the needs of their student body.

## NOTES

1. 64.11% of Memphis's population is Black, 29.23% is White, and 3.28% is other.

2. This survey participation slightly over-represents minorities as compared to our university demographics. That said, the respondents to the survey more accurately represent the demographics of students in our first-year writing courses since many of U of M's students have taken Dual Enrollment or transfer into the University and do not enroll in first-year writing courses.

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