

Centering Black Perspectives in Anti-Racist Writing Program Administration

Writing Program Administration “For Us, By Us”: Two HBCU WPAs Testify

David F. Green, Jr. and Michelle Bachelor Robinson

Testimonials have long represented an important genre of storytelling for race conscious scholars, as they build on the African American concept of “bearing witness,” that is the role of relaying narratives that affirm, challenge, or inform discussions about the truth of an experience or event. In recent scholarship, Black scholars have frequently reflected on and engaged in conversations around moving through the world and performing various scholarly and institutional tasks while existing in the bodies given by the universe—verb-ing “while black.” And so, we consider what it means to language and compose while “young, gifted, and Black.” In *Articulate While Black*, H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman assert that “in American public discourse, language is often overlooked as one of the most important cultural tools that we have for distinguishing ourselves [black folks] from others” (3). Yet, writing programs nationwide invest so many resources in trying to teach the Black language, expression, and cadence out of our students. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are therefore uniquely positioned to celebrate Black language and cultivate learning environments that value what students bring. The authors, WPAs from two prominent HBCUs, discuss what it means to perform the various roles of a WPA in environments historically invested in the success of Black and Brown students. In her blog post “Towards a Black Composition Studies: BLACK AS GRAVITAS (PART I),” Carmen Kynard calls for a “Black composition studies” that values Black legacies and Black futures as models for the way composition studies, and WPA work more specifically should engage difference. This essay offers a few perspectives on the ways compositionists interested in Black studies and cultural rhetorics might begin to rethink the work of writing programs and the types of environments that shape student writing experiences. Below we both testify to the work of our respective programs, and to the work we imagine as essential to rethinking the gatekeeping mechanisms that have persisted since composition’s inception as a university-wide course requirement.

MICHELLE

Serving as the WPA at a Historically Black College exclusively for women requires hyper-awareness of the fact that it is a space where race conscious writing and Black feminist ideology are comprehensively integrated into most aspects of the curriculum. In a vignette included in this special issue, I provide an account of a conscious decision by Spelman College's Comprehensive Writing Program to restructure a graduation requirement for our students, as a result of the impact of the intersectional pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice. In this essay, I offer an account of an additional programmatic, race conscious practice situated in faculty development. Our students need to be liberated from white supremacist practices in writing programs. Period. My tactical approach is to simply remix the microaggression and quietly push my colleagues toward a more inclusive pedagogy, through the professional development opportunities I offer annually.

As director of the writing program and chair of the Writing Intensive initiative, I offer an annual workshop to faculty in departments and programs across a variety of disciplines on how to write effective writing prompts. In this one-hour session, I suggest ways to construct writing prompts that most effectively guide students into and through composing content rich essays. One of the many tips I provide to instructors is to avoid assigning prescriptive formulas for organization. Though I acknowledge the value of a genre-centered writing pedagogy, I also acknowledge that in order for Black students to do writing, they must be allowed some agency in the doing. Prescriptive templates for organization stifle creative expression and limit the way Black students can language. Encouraging faculty to move away from these practices, which are rooted in the mainstream, and therefore resistant to cultural expression, fosters greater creativity and diversity in the writing experiences, resulting in a stronger final outcome. In this case, race conscious pedagogy is micro and resistant to standards that were developed, driven, and cultivated in white race supremacy (Kynard Part I). The CWP at Spelman fosters and supports pedagogy situated in outcomes that allow students to exercise agency in choosing to embrace as well as resist disciplinary standards. Engaging in these professional development conversations with faculty members is just one of the ways that the work of our writing program is necessarily race conscious. And though I acknowledge that this approach is a conservative one (baby steps), I am inspired by Kynard's "Towards a Black Composition Studies . . . (PART II)" and aim to shake some things up in 2021.

DAVID

Similar to Michelle, I engage in a variety of duties that center training, observing, and assessing the work of writing faculty and student writers at Howard University. Because of Howard University's position as an African Diasporic centered research university, there is a pronounced emphasis on both culture and service as guiding principles of the research and teaching at the university. Thus, there is always a desire, on my part, to incorporate an approach to and appreciation for cultural rhetorics research, and very specifically African American rhetorical research into my WPA tasks. Theories of language and culture that animate my own pedagogy, often inform the way I reason through faculty and student perspectives about writing. I've struggled and debated about our use of grading rubrics, common assignments, and common texts, largely *because my* orientation to writing program administration *is uniquely* shaped by a nuanced understanding of Black English, and subsequently the study of African American rhetoric.

My experiences as a racialized subject within composition classes over the years has demonstrated for me the numerous ways rubrics, common assignments, and common texts can be used to maintain and press racist and antiblack assumptions on students due to their speech, language habits, or cultural worldviews. And yet some of the most transformative experiences I have had in the classroom have been in courses in which I could move between structure and improvisation with instructors. In these sequenced courses, I have been able to follow, and diverge if I chose, the trajectory of intellectual goals and tasks provided to me by different instructors across a set of related or linked courses. Thus, much of my thinking around antiracism and critical race analysis in WPA work has been largely around the types of experiences I see ambitious students respond to, as well as the types of teaching that tends to lead them toward a longview of writing as a part of their critical thinking process.

COLLABORATIVE WITNESSING: MICHELLE AND DAVID

Kynard's blog post "Toward a Black Composition . . . (PART I)" suggests a need for reimagining composition as a site and resource that centers insurgent Black identities as central to the study of language, space, time, intellectual engagement and embodied performance. After one particular anecdote about her institutions processes, Kynard notes that, "*Black composition studies always recognizes the micro and yet overdetermined white supremacist processing of our schools and programs and imagines time, space, and possibility differently.*" Interwoven into the ways we ask students to understand themselves through their writing, are larger legacies and traditions they are

always carrying with them. We agree with Kynard and continue to actively reflect on the ways that writing is situated as an overdetermined micro-aggression toward student performance.

In response to Kynard's call that we reimagine composition separate from its exclusionary (and explicitly racist) roots, Cedric Robinson's work provides a useful understanding of authority and order as fixed and unquestioned concepts within U.S. culture. In *Terms of Order* for example, Robinson explores the binary ways in which authority and order are defined, and how these definitions often override and banish different visions of structure and purpose in an effort to disempower individuals, and to normalize the ways institutions manage those individuals. At the core of his studies into disciplines and disciplinarity¹ is a complex explanation for how the elision of culture and tradition from administrative work can severely alter the imaginative capacities of our students and the range of students that are served by our work.

Our attention to language remains vital for reimagining our work as displacing the numerous discriminatory attitudes embedded in many assessment approaches to student writing. In many ways, language helps to order and rearticulate our thinking, as it exposes the hidden value judgments layered into particular statements, policies, and pretense. With this understanding we ask, "What might a raciolinguistic approach to understanding student language practices offer WPA work and scholarship generally?" Toward this objective, Awad Ibrahim's discussion of differential treatment as an invisible component of our administrative processes is insightful. Differential treatment highlights a pattern of bias that is primarily expressed through the limiting of choice, and the strategic use of authority to coerce fast paced and uncritical decisions unevenly across different identity groups. Differential treatment is often implemented through the strategic use of language on professional documents and often presents professional opportunities or intellectual possibilities in vague or limiting ways. Such treatment highlights a significant way that black, or any culturally situated expression may be limited or surveilled and coerced out of classrooms, lesson plans, or compositions.

Thus for our purposes, Black Composition Studies provides an umbrella term for examining and rethinking how black experiences are employed in our discussions of program policies and philosophy, how black experiences are privileged or enhanced instead of diminished by our processes, and consideration for the ways that race and racism saturate many large portions of our exchanges with students and faculty.

CONCLUSION

As WPAs at Historically Black Universities we are placed in positions in which tasks such as assessment and professional development provide pathways toward situating the identity of our programs within a unique understanding of the Black tradition, but it also places responsibility on us to reconsider how we might draw from a Black rhetorical tradition, to challenge assumptions about the types of multimedia writing students are asked to produce, as well as draw on unique analyses of race to help us think differently about the ways biases are expressed through language, policies, and procedural practices in ways that suppress or stifle certain student identities. As WPAs at HBCUs we are in unique positions to both identify and reconsider the policies and approaches to faculty development that maintain legacies of differential treatment regarding race and culture.

NOTE

1. In Robinson's *Terms of Order*, his expressed goal is to understand how Western political thought has come to dominate the very ways we are able to imagine almost all conceptions of politics or social movements. However, the implications of his studies highlight the various ways that language is used to limit the very ways people are able to imagine order, or even the function of processes for different groups and bodies.

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