

Curating a Place to Begin: Creating Resources That Center the Work of Black and Indigenous Scholars and Other Scholars of Color

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In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, I began curating and sharing (via Twitter) resources for teaching in and leading anti-racist writing programs. As Les Hutchinson Campos has argued, “Citation politics is critical praxis” (qtd. in Nancy, 2020). The argument I’d like to make here is similarly straightforward: curating and sharing resources is critical, anti-racist praxis because it offers a starting point for those new to anti-racist teaching and administration without burdening Black scholars and other scholars of color who are too often asked to do the time consuming and uncompensated labor associated with this work. As a white woman WPA who is invested in building toward an anti-racist writing program, I believe that I have a responsibility to center the work of Black scholars and other scholars of color as I work toward those anti-racist goals, and that is precisely what I’ve sought to do in the resources I’ve curated.

Writing about the distinct importance of anti-racist curatorial work in museums and libraries, Elena Gonzales (2019) argues, “Curators are tinkerers in our informational environments. Our informational environments inform the development of our opinions and, from there, our choices of when and how to take action.” Within composition studies, Iris Ruiz (2016) has made a complementary argument about the histories that form the foundation of the discipline:

The language of [existing disciplinary histories] does not represent me, and I can’t imagine myself there in the Harvard halls walking to my next writing class, in Harvard classrooms looking studiously at the distinguished white-male professor, or even in the Harvard bathrooms getting refreshed for my next class (and, no, not even cleaning them)...The more I can’t imagine myself there, the more I wonder why I’m not there. Is there something wrong with me? Why can’t I hear how my voice would sound if I asked the professor, ‘What do you mean that rhetoric started in Greece?’ Wait a minute, I can’t ask that, because I’m not there. (p. 1)

As writing program administrators, we have a responsibility to ensure that students and teachers of color see themselves in disciplinary histories and the other documents and spaces that provide frameworks and foundations

for our writing programs. We have a responsibility to create spaces where Black, Latinx, and Indigenous teachers, researchers, and students see their experiences not as peripheral to our work but as central to it.

Disciplinary histories (Ruiz, 2016), curated exhibits (Gonzales, 2019), and works cited pages (Bailey & Trudy, 2018) are all places for critical, anti-racist praxis. These are vital spaces for anti-racist work because they are places to begin: they offer the framing for a set of questions or an entire discipline, and when these introductory spaces exclude Black scholars, Latinx scholars, Indigenous scholars, Asian/Asian Pacific Islander scholars, and other scholars of color, they reinforce the racist framings and foundations that characterize too much of the work of the academy. For writing program administrators in particular, creating introductory spaces (reading lists, professional development workshops, and teaching practica for graduate students) that center the work of Black scholars and other scholars of color is an important step toward creating anti-racist writing programs, which I have argued elsewhere are characterized by “particular concrete classroom, program, and labor practices . . . classroom community standards that foreground equity . . . [and] outcomes and statements of programmatic identity that emphasize culturally sustaining practices [with] keen attention to equity gaps” (McIntyre, 2019, p. 4). To realize this goal of anti-racist writing programs, though, we need an alternative foundation that looks much different than the so-called “Harvard history” Ruiz (2016) describes. We cannot build anti-racist writing programs from our current Harvard-centric history nor can we continue training graduate teaching associates with texts that too often exclude the lives and literacy practices of students of color. Ruiz’s historiographic work is central to such a shift, but we also need new resources (reading lists, teaching how-tos, and sample syllabi) that show us anti-racism in practice.

This is why I’ve spent time over the last year or so creating and sharing resources that center the work of Black and Latinx composition scholars: I’ve shared resources specifically aimed at helping faculty new to anti-racist work make such a transition (see my “7 Steps Toward Antiracist Teaching” and “Antiracist Teaching Resources/Readings”). But I’ve also created resources for teaching online, teaching first-year writing without a textbook, using reading circles, and using backwards design to plan a writing course. All of these resources center the work of scholars of color and/or position equity as central to our work as writing teachers.

It’s not enough, though, to curate reading lists that focus on Black, Latinx, and Indigenous literacy practices. We must also incorporate the work of scholars of color across the topics we cover: for example, it’s not enough to include the work of James Baldwin during the week a class

discusses Black English; instead, we must include work on Black English from the very beginning. Baldwin's work (plus work from scholars like Geneva Smitherman, Vershawn Ashanti Young and April Baker-Bell) should be part of the conversation in which we define literacy in general. Siloing scholars of color only in parts of a reading list or syllabus focused on "diversity" or "inclusion" is tokenization. The work of such scholars is not an afterthought; it is integral to adequately defining our discipline and preparing future writing teachers. (We might think, here, of moving from a metaphor of curation to one of construction: this work is about building and rebuilding writing courses and programs that center the experiences of teachers, scholars, and students of color and with the work of scholars of color as both a foundation and a central feature.)

This necessity extends beyond reading lists into other kinds of resources, too. My "Backwards Design & Planning a Writing Class" resource is perhaps a good example here. Ostensibly, this resource (which doesn't include links to readings or other work) is a "neutral" space, a how-to guide for folks new to planning a college composition course, but in each section of the document, I ask questions that remind teachers that our students come from diverse communities and have varied experiences with reading and writing. For example, in the first section of the document, "Before Creating a Syllabus and Writing Assignments/Prompts," as part of the very first question in the section, I ask instructors, "How will you support students and their communities via the work of your class?" This question reinforces culturally sustaining pedagogical practices that affirm the value and importance of community literacy practices. Similarly, in the following section, "As You Create Writing Assignments/Prompts," I ask instructors to think about how the "assignment make[s] room for diverse language users." My goal in each section is to ask instructors to think about language diversity as an asset to include in their course planning and to begin with equity and justice as central goals of their courses.

In part, creating these resources was a part of my commitment to realizing an anti-racist writing program at my own institution. Each of the documents I've shared began, at least in part, as a way of solving a problem or addressing a concern within my own program. But this work was also about recognizing and countering the uncompensated labor that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous scholars are too often asked to do. Often couched as service, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on many campuses are too often foisted onto faculty of color. Likewise, when a university looks to create a new program or workshop about diversity or equity, faculty of color are too often the ones tasked with making it so. It should not be this way. White faculty like myself, who are committed to anti-racist work, have

a responsibility to do this work (while centering and celebrating the existing resources and scholarship Black, Latinx, and Indigenous scholars have been creating for decades) rather than asking for more labor from these same colleagues.

Creating resources, conducting professional development, and teaching graduate teaching associates are all fairly standard parts of the work of a WPA. But it is in these basic tasks that we can have the most impact: changing our campus cultures is necessary and vital work, but it takes time and coalitions. Changing the ways that we conduct professional development workshops and train graduate teaching associates allows us to make immediate, concrete changes and allows us to build the capacity for larger structural changes within our writing programs and beyond. These changes might take the form of structural changes to grading and assessment practices in writing classes and across campus, changes to the way that writing and communication are discussed and integrated in courses (particularly general education courses) outside the writing program, and broader, university-wide discussions about the kinds of linguistic prejudice that do real and ongoing harm to students of color, particularly our Black students. And when we share the resources we create, those good changes spread, hopefully creating the momentum we need to see the broader changes necessary for equity and justice.

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