Racial Literacy and Equitable Change: From the Writing Classroom to the Campus

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Our good intentions are not enough.

"Education systems in all societies are designed to serve as the primary institutions that reproduce dominant social and economic orders, customs and belief systems;" as a result, schooling in the United States is "a function of capitalism, white supremacy and their intrinsic restraints on democracy and social equality" (Keisch & Scott, 2015, p. 2).

It is not enough to say that schools suffer the same racism that prevails throughout the rest of society.

It would be accurate to say that schools are one of strongest forces – if not the strongest force – by which that racism is maintained and normalized.

In the dominant narrative, white supremacy is extreme, violent, and easy – for most – to recognize.

The truth, however, is that real white supremacy is already embedded in the U.S. imaginary.

And this white supremacy can be far more difficult to combat than overt, individual acts of discrimination and violence: its influence is so far-reaching and its entrenchment in our social, governmental, and cultural institutions is so deep that it is sometimes invisible, even to those dedicated to social justice.

White Supremacy in Education

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

- In the early years of the U.S., the role of schools to promote active citizenship and republican values was widely celebrated.

- In a country seeking to establish a strong, common national identity, schools promised to turn citizens into "Americans" almost from infancy.

- As immigration increased, schools remained "the main institutions charged with the responsibility of homogenization" (Kaestle, 1973, p. 158).

- In a 1783 textbook promoting an English separate from the British English of the old world, Noah Webster declared: "Let the first word he lisps be 'Washington'" (p. 6).

- The "master script" legitimizes "dominant, White, upper-class, male voicings as the 'standard' knowledge students need to know" (Swartz, 1992, p. 341); other voices may be elective, euphemistic, or essentializing ("ethnic," "alternative," "diverse," etc.)

- White Northern European American behaviors, discursive practices, and pedagogies are normalized.

- Academic protocol is built upon a Western, white, Christian model of communication that emphasizes assertive yet polite verbal contributions.

- Students are expected to write in a standardized English derived from white language practices. Since there is no actual "standard English," the expectation is "a bias towards an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language… drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 67).

Teachers (regardless of intent) tend to see these racialized practices as evidence of meaning-making and intellect because, in most cases, teachers have been trained to see them as such.

In this way, the academy passes down the same types of racist ideologies and practices that have sustained it since its inception.

If it's embedded in the system, then it's embedded in us, too.

Toward Antiracist Education

STARTING WITH RACIAL LITERACY

Antiracism

Antiracism is "an active process" (King, 2016, p. 63) to understand *and challenge* racism as it manifests in systems and lived experiences.

Too often, "educators treat equity as a series of tools, strategies, and compliance tasks versus a whole-person, whole-system change process linked to culture, identity, and healing" (Dugan, 2021).

Antiracist work is complex and requires the interrogation and reconsideration of structures, policies, attitudes, behaviors, and ideologies.

An Integrative Approach to Antiracism in Education

Policy

Programs

Practice

Racial Literacy

Racial literacy is the collection of behaviors, skills, and discursive practices that enable individuals to interrogate the ways in which race and racism influence their lives.

The practice of racial literacy helps us make racism legible (Guinier, 2004, p. 110).

Characteristics of Racial Literacy

Guinier, 2004	Twine, 2004	Twine, 2010
• Recognizes that race, racialism, and racism are contextual • **Views race on psychological, interpersonal, and structural levels** • Considers race as it intersects with other demographic factors, including but not limited to ethnicity, socioeconomic class, geography, and gender	• The provision of conceptual and discursive practices through which to interrogate race • Access to Black social networks • Exposure to Black-produced media and symbols of historical and cultural Black struggles	• Recognition of racism as a contemporary rather than historical problem • **Consideration of the ways in which race and racism are influenced by other factors such as class, gender, and sexuality** • **Understanding the cultural value of whiteness** • Belief in the constructedness and socialization of racial identity • **Development of language practices through which to discuss race, racism, and antiracism** • Ability to decode race, racism, and racialism.

Un(Learning) and (Un)Doing

There is no single right answer or approach.

#SorryNotSorry

Policy, Programs & Practice in the Writing Classroom

Policy

Late Work Policies

"Comportment" or "Behavior"

Approaches to Grading

Course and Section Descriptions

Why is this policy here?

Who wrote the policy?

Am I allowed to revise it? If not, can I add to or contextualize it?

Whom might this policy impact?

Will the impact on different students be the same?

What do we hope to gain from the policy?

What might this policy prevent?

Adding to Existing Documents

THE REQUIRED COURSE DESCRIPTION

Welcome to Freshman Composition! This course is designed to encourage you to engage with the world as a composer: to intentionally absorb yourself in language, to purposefully interact with readings, and to produce your own texts as a participant in ongoing critical conversations. This course emphasizes the practices of reading, research, writing, and thinking as fundamentally rhetorical acts – acts with particular conditions and purposes that are shaped by context. To foster your understanding of writing as a rhetorical act, this course will work to build a classroom community and cultivate collaboration among students. You will work closely with fellow students, encounter a broad range of ideas about the world, increase your ability to engage others through language, and explore a variety of strategies for writing. In addition, you will meet with me to discuss your work in one-on-one or small group conference settings. We will focus on the communal nature of knowledge and on writing as a recursive process that allows you time for inquiry and thoughtful reflection, extensive drafting and revision, and ongoing reading and research.

MY ADDITIONS

This particular section of ENG 110 will address the relationship between literacy, context, and identity. We will consider the following as we move forward:

- How do our literacy practices reflect our lived experiences and cultural ideologies?
- How do our past experiences with reading, writing, learning influence our engagement with texts?
- How does an individual's positionality determine the way one creates and understands a text?
- How does linguistic diversity affect our literacy practices?
- How do we communicate with audiences whose experiences and cultures differ from our own?

Writing New Policies

WHAT THE POLICY SAYS

The Respectful Honesty Policy

As many of the topics we will discuss via discussion boards may be sensitive and/or controversial in nature, it is expected that all students will treat one another with the utmost kindness and respect. At the same time, however, I advocate an honesty policy, which means that you are encouraged to share your thoughts and feelings on these topics in the most truthful way with which you feel comfortable. We will explore this policy in greater detail during the first week of class. (For more on this policy, see Grayson, 2018.)

WHAT WE DISCUSS

- What does "respectful honesty" mean to you?
- What might "respectful honesty" look like in an asynchronous online class?
- Where do your ideas of respect and honesty come from?
- How might you interact with someone whose definition of respect differs from your own?
- How do you respond if someone offends you? Why do you respond that way?
- How do you respond if you find out that you've offended someone else? Why do you think you respond that way?
- What challenges do you typically face in communicating with other people? How do you know? How have you resolved them in the past?

Contextualizing Existing Policies

- Separate sections (with explanations) for Class Policies and Department/College/University Policies

- Explanations of the policies as you will enforce them

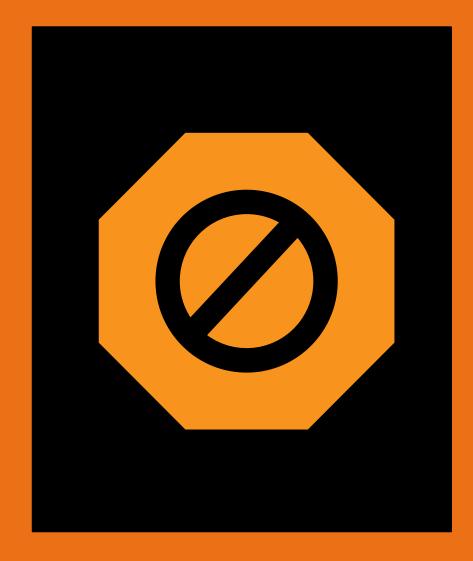- Discussion of all policies, students' understandings thereof, and their potential impacts

Programs

Curriculum

Texts

Assignments

Activities

Whose voices are represented in course texts?

Whose voices are absent?

What kind of assignments do I require? Who came up with the assignments?

What theories of writing are my assignments based upon? Who came up with those theories?

What scaffolding is provided? What theory of learning is that scaffolding based upon?

What options exist in those assignments?

Have I tried the assignment myself? What challenges have I faced?

Practice

Pedagogy

Classroom interaction

Why am I taking this pedagogical approach?

Did or would this approach work for me?

Who is the ideal student for this approach?

Who might be challenged by this approach? Might that challenge be a positive or negative experience?

Are the examples I provide relevant to students? Are they more relevant to some students than others?

How do we interact in the classroom? Why do we interact that way?

What expectations do I have when it comes to behavior and communication?

On what have I based those expectations?

NARRATIVE SONG LYRICS CURRICULUM

- Feature story songs from various genres of music

- Consider who these stories represent, who they are told by and for, and whose voices they include and exclude

- Invite students to reflect upon how they came to their conclusions

- See Grayson, 2017, 2018

EXPLICIT RACIAL LITERACY CURRICULUM

- Share the racial literacy framework(s) (Guinier, 2004; Twine, 2004, 2010)

- Assign a racial autobiography (Grayson, 2018, 2021)

- Explore the discursive practices of racial literacy (Grayson, 2017, 2019)

- Invite students to write explicitly about race, racism, and antiracism throughout the semester

Sample Approaches

But Wait! There's More...

...AND IT MUST HAPPEN BEFORE EVERYTHING ELSE

(Would you assign a writing task you've never written? If so, go back four slides.)

"An experienced hiker who sets off to guide a group of backpackers through a difficult trail must fill her knapsack with camping gear, extra clothing, ample foodstuffs, bug repellent, and all other provisions her clients require to endure the journey. She must show the rest of the group the paths available and walk ahead when necessary. But the experienced hiker must herself make the journey, traversing rough terrain, shielding from the elements, and stopping on occasion to marvel at the paradoxically infinite ephemera of nature… Racial literacy is a continual process of learning with no definitive point of mastery. It is the active, continual observing, interpreting, questioning, and communicating necessary to understand race, racism, and antiracism. Like the backpacking guide, the racial literacy instructor must be willing to forego the role of the expert and remain instead a continuous learner. In the racial literacy classroom, teachers are not lecturers; they are well-prepared guides in their students' journey of racial literacy." (Grayson, 2018, p. 15)

Do Your Work First

- Reflect upon your own positionality.

- Acknowledge and examine your assumptions and biases (about people, racism, society, writing, teaching, and learning).

- Learn about the contexts in which you're teaching and learning (including the students, the school, the faculty, the administration, the local community).

Then, learn more.

The Bigger Picture

THE WRITING CLASSROOM AS ONE PART OF CAMPUS ANTIRACIST WORK

Organization leaders and policymakers explore how founding documents, by-laws, and policies perpetuate white supremacy and contribute to inequity and marginalization of staff and others; this includes planning, revision, or drafting of existing or new documents.

Program leaders examine how programmatic structures and offerings perpetuate racism and develop ideas for small-scale or large-scale programmatic change. Who benefits from existing programs? Which frameworks guide program operation?

To move from structure to behavior, members critically examine their own positionalities, relative privilege, and attitudes about race and racism, and subsequent impacts on work and interaction. The term "practice" connotes the ongoing nature of this work and the continual (un)learning it requires.

Questions?

Comments, compliments, and complaints are also welcome.

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