

TALKING JUSTICE: THE ROLE OF ANTIRACISM IN THE WRITING CENTER

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Abstract

The article describes the process that four writing center consultants took to design and implement an antiracist workshop at the Oklahoma State University Writing Center (OSUWC). Using antiracist pedagogy, feminist invitational rhetoric, and inclusive writing center pedagogy, this essay documents the creation of an antiracist workshop designed for writing center staff and consultants, our presentation of the workshop at the South Central Writing Centers Association conference, the revision process, and training of writing center staff at the OSUWC. Rather than outline a one-size-fits-all workshop, this article provides a framework for addressing racism with reflexive, context-based resources.

Writing center scholarship has established that social and racial justice should be integral to the writing center's mission. In a 2016 special issue of *Praxis*, Asao B. Inoue asserts that writing centers, "facilitate structural changes in society, disciplines, and the institution itself," suggesting that writing centers can be "centers for revolutions, for social justice work" (Inoue).

Consultants and staff at the Oklahoma State University Writing Center¹ (OSUWC) work hard to epitomize Inoue's interpretation of writing centers by maintaining a place of collaboration and support through continuous self-reflection, routine procedural evaluation, and an unrelenting quest for effective approaches to writing center praxis. In recent years, OSUWC leaders have supported student-driven inquiry projects and events that work to make our writing center more inclusive, including but not limited to Conversation Groups for English learners, Safe Zone (LGBTQ +) training & research, training from multilingual specialists, letter-writing campaigns, and community discussion forums and writing events focused on issues of race and racism.

Since OSUWC is part of a college campus where quotidian racial aggressions occur, we agreed the space could serve as a launch pad to start addressing racism on our campus. The Talking Justice Project (TJP) is led by the authors of this article who are four OSUWC graduate consultants. TJP strives to answer the call to address racism in institutions that were designed to maintain white supremacy and systemically

disadvantage People of Color. Continuing the trajectory of social justice work in our writing center, TJP members designed and implemented workshops focused on antiracist pedagogy for OSUWC consultants and the broader writing center community.

This essay documents the steps taken to create an antiracist workshop, which includes the designing of the workshop in early November of 2017, the presentation of the workshop at South Central Writing Centers Association (SCWCA), the revision process, and the training of writing center staff at OSUWC. In this article, we discuss the literature upon which our workshop was built, the creation, implementation, and responses to our initial workshops, the process of revising for context, and what we learned as a result of this praxis. We provide an overview of how we negotiated and addressed the unforeseen complexities that arise when doing social justice work in writing centers. Finally, we discuss our vision for how this work can be implemented in our center and other writing centers in the future. Rather than proposing a one-size-fits-all workshop, this article provides a framework for addressing racism with reflexive, context-based resources to address the diverse iterations of writing centers.

Review of Literature and Resources

In September of 2017, Tola, Natasha, and Lisa attended a session of The Conversation Workshops Pilot (CWP) for writing center consultants and English Department instructors at OSU that was facilitated by Hillary and the co-creators of the CWP.² The CWP workshop, which teaches strategies for interpersonal antiracist activism by using Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin's invitational rhetoric, is divided into three parts: Intentionality, Dialogues, and Community. The Intentionality section asks participants to consider the ways they are impacted by systems of racism. Dialogue offers a guide for talking about systems of racism with loved ones using "intentional dialogue," which is based on invitational rhetoric, otherwise understood as "an invitation to understanding" that relies on "the

offering of perspectives and the creation of the external conditions of safety, value, and freedom” (Foss and Griffin 2). Community urges them to build networks for accountability that support their interpersonal activism.³

The CWP session for Writing Center consultants sparked meaningful conversation about how these strategies for personal relationships could be adapted to the university setting. In November of 2017, Natasha and Hillary wrote and submitted a proposal to our regional writing center conference, SCWCA. The initial proposal established a guiding vision, and in the spring Lisa and Tola helped create the conference workshop activities, which generated a concrete agenda for developing tutor training at OSUWC.

In addition to the CWP, TJP drew inspiration from writing center scholarship, which has recently called attention to the racial inequities prevalent in academia. Scholars acknowledge the unique position that writing center staff and consultants have in denouncing (or enforcing) practices that maintain the status quo of oppression against historically marginalized groups. Our research led us to the following foundational pieces which support the development of the workshop goals and strategies.

“Making Commitments to Racial Justice Actionable,” Rasha Diab et al.’s chapter in *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, outlines “what is wrong with the traditional reliance on such tools as the ‘confessional narrative’ and explains how these ideas leave people trapped in this belief that racism is something that is solely the defect of an individual and not as the result of the oppressive environment we all live in” (Tinsley 297). Beth Godbee et al.’s article “Body + Power + Justice: Movement-Based Workshops for Critical Tutor Education” offers ways to incorporate the body into tutor training as a means to cultivate critical awareness. They argue that their approach provides a possible solution to writing center consultant’s inability to meaningfully engage with antiracist strategies and to restructure racial power. Nancy M. Grimm’s “Rethorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race” challenges writing centers to reflect on their own practices to find the deficiencies embedded in their policies that uphold the racially inequitable ideologies of the educational institution. Similarly, Michelle T. Johnson’s “Racial Literacy and the Writing Center” discusses tutors’ unwillingness to engage with racially influenced works, finding that their racial literacy increases when consultants are prompted to effectively interact with the racial content.

Victor Villanueva’s “Blind: Talking about the New Racism,” encourages writing center practitioners to talk about racism when racism is the (in)visible subject, naming writing centers as a part of the system which perpetuates and sustains racism, while also calling writing centers to action to “be bold,” to “think of the silence, [and] expose it” (Villanueva 18). Aligned with Villanueva, Inoue’s essay “Afterword: Narratives that Determine Writers and Social Justice Writing Center Work” explores his return to writing center work and his understanding of the significance that race and racism play in writing center scholarship and institutional structures. Greenfield and Rowan’s introduction to *Writing Centers and the New Racism* reminds us that staying silent about racism in writing centers is a “function of racism” (“Introduction” 5), and their chapter “Beyond the ‘Week Twelve Approach’: Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Antiracist Tutor Education” argues that because writing centers are raced, writing center directors should be involved in the work of preparing writing center tutors to “recognize and resist injustices in the writing center and the world” (“Beyond” 131).

Cheryl E. Matias’ *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education* outlines her research related to her work as a teacher-trainer for predominantly white students, arguing that educators can best serve students and themselves by reflecting on their whiteness and how they impact social justice and antiracist work in their classrooms. She documents moments of resistance from the students and her interpretations of those moments. Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young’s book *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication* collects the stories of several educators as they navigate racism, complicity, reflection, and resistance in their personal and professional lives. These current conversations around race and systemic racism justify the need for our work and informed TJP’s workshop by providing a foundational sense of the scope of the problem, guidelines and warnings for this pursuit, and lenses for reflection and revision.

Our Process

TJP began out of a desire to enact practices informed by the strategies for antiracist writing center pedagogy that we had read about in the work of scholars like Villanueva, Greenfield and Rowan, and Godbee et al. Rather than approaching this as a research project, we sought to reflect upon our process of developing a training module that responds to the particular contexts of our writing center and that could be adapted for others.

This section describes our praxis as we developed workshops for regional conference participants and our writing center consultants between fall 2017 and summer 2018 at a PWI situated in the South Central region of the U.S. Because this began as an informal training exercise, we did not seek approval from our Institutional Review Board for research or assessment purposes. We have taken a narrative and reflective approach, focusing on our learning experience rather than the review and analysis of systematically collected data. Here we describe our process in order to be transparent about what happened, the contributors and workshop participants, and our process of reviewing materials and revising in hopes of developing a framework for creating reflexive, context-based resources for addressing racism in writing centers.

Contexts of the Workshop

Following the first CWP workshop in September 2017, Hillary and Natasha met to begin developing a workshop that could be used in tutor training, which we would test at the SCWCA conference. Drawing upon the invitational principles of equality, self-determination, and immanent value (Foss and Griffin 4), we agreed to begin shaping a workshop around the following three strategies for responding to problematic or racist incidents or ideas: promote mutual understanding, learning, respect; highlight common ground while acknowledging problematic points or harmful ideas; and clarify issues or redefine terms. Ultimately, we saw our role as two-fold; we hoped to provide training for the consultants at OSUWC, and we hoped to share our process with the larger community of writing center practitioners in order to contribute to and learn from scholarship on antiracist work in writing centers.

Developing the Workshop

During our initial meetings we composed and revised the three primary goals, establishing that TJP strives to

- A) Cultivate a “willingness to be disturbed,” to disrupt our own individual ways of thinking and being that have continued systemic racism, which demands “a tireless investment in reflection, openness, and hope for a better, more fulfilling future for us all” (Diab et al. 20).
- B) Create (brave) spaces where people are able to discuss issues and concerns surrounding race and racism with a willingness to be wrong, to

call out with compassion, and to seek mutual understanding.

- C) Enact mindful inclusion practices that support diverse writers and resist the writing center’s historical role in gatekeeping and assimilating for academic institutions.

We spent several weeks creating the workshop for SCWCA, where Hillary and Natasha presented. The first workshop focused on three original activities: An anonymous reflection activity, a six-word memoir, and a role-playing scenario.

Implementing the Workshop

We planned for the workshop to occur in small groups of OSUWC consultants (ideally five to eight people, about the size of our staff development mentor groups⁴), and we documented and reflected on the planning process to share it at SCWCA, where we hoped to receive feedback. We also requested that both sets of workshop participants complete anonymous surveys in Google Forms to provide us with feedback on the activities, but because we ran out of time during the workshop, we received no responses to our survey on the SCWCA workshop.

Without written feedback, we relied upon Hillary and Natasha’s descriptions of the workshop and participants’ comments for the revision process. This reflective process guided our modifications of the workshop activities, for which we observed a need to develop more context-based scenarios for our workshop’s role-playing activity. To address this, we collected surveys about the forms of racism that participants had witnessed or experienced on campus and in the writing center. We used the survey responses to refine and craft existing and new scenarios for our consultant training. We then fictionalized some stories from the surveys and incorporated them into small-scale workshops for OSUWC administrators, leaders, and mentor consultants. We received immediate verbal feedback and suggestions from the first group of OSUWC participants, which we implemented prior to presenting with subsequent OSUWC groups, who responded to our paper surveys (Figure 1. TJP Survey, adapted from an Oklahoma Writing Project survey). Our reflection and verbal and written feedback from SCWCA and OSUWC participants has directly influenced our revision process, and it continues to as we develop our resources for antiracist writing center praxis.

Workshop Participants

Workshop participants consisted of three different groups connected to the writing center. At the 2018 SCWCA Conference at the University of Central Arkansas, our workshop participants included writing center administrators, consultants, and student leaders of writing centers in the South Central U.S. The second group of contributors was the survey participants, consultants at our institution who responded to an emailed survey regarding their experiences and observations of racism at OSUWC. Their experiences served as the basis for determining whether our scenarios were true to our institutional context and revising the scenarios for relevance. Afterwards, we conducted two small workshop sessions with the third group, which consisted of mentor group leaders and administrative staff of the OSUWC. These sessions were led by at least two of us, and as with our first workshop participants, we asked them to practice and reflect on the scenarios we developed from our initial survey. The administrators and mentor group leaders provided immediate feedback that helped in (re)shaping the scenarios even as we proceeded in the praxis. The mentor group leaders then led the rest of the OSUWC consultants in smaller versions of the workshops in their mentor groups, about which some group leaders provided feedback via email. In total, our various contributors, including writing center novices, student leaders, staff, and administrators, provided meaningful insights that supported the development and revision of this workshop.

Workshop Responses

Throughout the workshop process, we adapted the workshop in response to multiple types of feedback, including the workshop events, the stories provided by the survey of OSUWC consultants, and workshop participants' immediate feedback. Participants also provided us with written responses to an anonymous Padlet activity, which asked what types of antiracist work was being done in their writing centers and the ways in which their writing centers enabled or perpetuated institutional/systemic racism. Several participants also allowed us to keep their six-word memoirs, which were handwritten reflections on the first time they remembered being aware of their race. We also took notes over the participants' discussion of the role-playing scenarios and the ways that they considered implementing the three strategies. The OSUWC survey was emailed to consultants as a Google Form that requested their observations and experiences of racism. In order to anticipate what

problems and concerns OSUWC consultants might bring from their own experiences, the anonymous survey asked questions such as these:

- Describe a time that you have been made to feel uncomfortable due to your ethnicity or race at the writing center.
- Give an example of a time that you may have made someone else feel excluded or marginalized, even if unintentionally.
- Describe a writing center session when you observed that race became an issue. How did you feel?

In the two small workshop sessions with mentor group leaders and administrative staff, each shared new strategies and offered feedback on those we presented. We took notes on the verbal feedback that they offered immediately following the session. Some mentor group leaders shared with us how consultants perceived these strategies and the additional strategies that emerged from their conversations, which we reflected on and incorporated into our later revisions.

SCWCA Workshop

During our presentation at SCWCA, workshop participants first responded anonymously to a discussion question on Padlet in which they shared what types of antiracist work was being done in their writing centers and how their centers enabled systems of oppression. After briefly discussing their responses, we introduced the goals and significance of our workshop, explaining, "This workshop operates from the perspective that writing center and composition scholarship has an obligation to acknowledge and resist the ways that our programs and research have historically served to support the primacy of Standard White English and other systems that reinforce hegemonic whiteness." We explained that we hoped the workshops would allow us to share and reciprocate strategies for non-coercive, one-with-one conversations built on patience, active listening, and critical thinking—consistent with the goals of an inclusive writing center pedagogy.

During the next activity, participants created and shared six-word memoirs about the first time they remembered being aware of their race. Participants taped their memoirs to the walls of the room then engaged in a silent gallery walk, in which they left comments on others' memoirs using sticky notes. As a group, we concluded that our worldviews are shaped by our perspectives on race and our racialized experiences. We hoped to emphasize the importance of cultivating practices that foster mindfulness of one's own racialized experience and perspectives,

especially for those who have not previously felt the need to consider how race shapes their experience.

For the final activity, we applied a staple of writing center training: the guided scenarios, and we offered three pedagogical strategies that could be used in contentious moments. We designed these strategies to reach beyond the work of the writing center session, and because of their connection to invitational rhetoric, they would be relevant to many different types of scenarios. Our presentation provided an overview of invitational rhetoric before introducing these three strategies to use in response to a selection of scenarios (see Figure 2). Each strategy is accompanied by a corresponding scripted template for responding, as follows:

1. *Strategy*: “Promote mutual understanding, learning, respect”

Template: “I appreciate your experience with X, and I’m sure I can learn a lot from you about Y. I hope that we can both be open to listening and learning from each other.”

2. *Strategy*: “Highlight common ground while acknowledging problematic points or harmful ideas”

Template: “Based on your comments about X, it seems like we agree about what it means to Y, but we may need to think about some other ways of understanding Z.”

3. *Strategy*: “Clarify issues or redefine terms”

Template: “I think that you’re saying that X means ABC, but can I tell you why I think X means ADE?”

Because, as Greenfield and Rowan suggest, all members of the writing center encounter manifestations of racism and operate within systems of oppression, our workshop activities were designed to include participants in all positions in the writing center (“Introduction”). We accomplished this by providing scenarios that account for the diverse occupants of the writing center and the professional relationships in which they engage: Consultant/Consultant; Consultant/Writer; Administrator/Writer; Administrator/Consultants. Participants paired up and received a scenario representing one of the above dynamics, then they responded to their scenario by playing out the scene using one of the strategies we presented and another of their own making. Each of the pairs connected the scenarios to their particular contexts and problems related to their spaces, infrastructures, and staffing. While checking in with the pairs, Hillary spoke to two experienced directors who had been assigned the

following scenario shown in Figure 3, which prompts participants to put themselves in the position of a writing center director trying to engage in conversation with staff members about making hiring practices more inclusive, in a situation where a staff member resists. The two participants had similar responses to the scenario, expressing that they would not encounter this particular situation because they would never discuss hiring practices with staff. Hillary asked follow-up questions, prompting them to consider what could be done in this situation to promote learning. This moment of participants’ resistance would inform the revision process in significant ways.

Before concluding, we briefly discussed what other pairs encountered. The responses included consideration of power dynamics and the nature of the “peer” relationships in their centers, and participants explained that appropriate or comfortable approaches would vary depending upon the identity of the interlocutor and how they might be perceived. The workshop ended rather abruptly because we were immersed in the follow-up discussion, but this workshop experience provided great insight for how we might anticipate participants’ attitudes and responses in the future.

Revising the Workshop

During our initial meeting after the SCWCA conference, we discussed what worked, and we revised our workshop to train writing center leaders to present to the OSUWC tutors. Due to the concerns that arose at SCWCA, we questioned if we should revise the language in some scenarios or simply acknowledge that we would encounter some participants who would be resistant to change. We sought guidance from our writing center administrators, and we decided that we only needed to refine the language of some scenarios and to develop more scenarios to encourage discourse surrounding race issues for administrators. With the help of our writing center leadership, we had the opportunity not only to contribute but also to cultivate a willingness to be disturbed and to discuss racism. The joint effort of the four presenters with the collaboration of the writing center leaders played a critical role in starting a genuine conversation. To further our initiative, writing center administrators and leaders offered additional literature, resources, suggestions, and ways to address the issue from multiple vantage points.

We had the opportunity to work alongside consultants at OSUWC whose diverse background, cultural views, experiences, and differing expertise contributed immensely to the success of this project.

We felt that it would be important to gather their stories pertaining to racism in the institution, which we did by collecting survey responses in a Google Form. We then revised the scenarios to incorporate some of their responses and to provide more concrete descriptions in order to avoid some problems that emerged from a lack of clarity in the descriptions.

In order to prepare mentor group leaders to facilitate smaller workshops, we began by discussing the workshop's goals and relevance to our writing center. Much like our opening to the SCWCA workshop, we also discussed the writing center's role in addressing racism, how inherent oppression is in institutions, and what responsibilities consultants have to themselves and the writing center. We then paired the mentors and asked them to discuss two scenarios and develop a new strategy for each. Each pair shared their new strategies and offered feedback on those we presented. Interestingly, one of the new strategies was to address ambiguity. We interpreted the new strategy to read something like, "I heard you say this, and I was wondering if you could elaborate." By saying this, the consultant addresses the writer with respect for their work while at the same time invites the writer to explain themselves further. We also learned that one of our strategies—"clarify issues or redefine terms"—may cause some confusion, so we revised our presentation to include an example of how to use this strategy.

After the first workshop session with mentors, we decided to provide more concrete resources that they could use in their workshops. We provided materials that outlined the strategies and goals of the project, including a handout (see Figure 4) and a Google Slides presentation that they could use in the small workshops, as well as an outline that guided our own presentation of the material. Feedback from mentors suggests that several consultants were encouraged by these strategies and agreed that we needed more of these initiatives to make the writing center more just and accommodating to all students.

Implications

Our workshop addresses writing center consultants, staff, and directors, and we must account for the fact that our audiences, like the demographic at PWIs, would be predominately white. Like anyone who does social justice work, we hoped for an audience that would be prepared for and open to engaging with the ideologies and concepts we presented. While there is no script to how anyone will handle any situation, Matias explains that, when faced with matters of race and racism, there is the potential

for white participants to either "(a) cry, which is symbolic of the normative story of how people of Color are the ones who cause White's pain, which stifles conversation and elevates white emotionality above the pain that people of Color face daily; or (b) act aggressively, symbolic of the repressed pain of lying about a colorblind stance" (18). Our goal was to avoid these possible responses while still leading people to a "willingness to be disturbed" (Diab et al. 19). Our strategies were intended to invite our audience to see the systems in place around them and to demonstrate how each of us could be contributing to the systems of racism that continue to thrive in society and between university walls.

In our workshops, we noticed that consultants and administrators were more inclined to respond to problematic and racist incidents in ways that required minimal effort, disruption, and disturbance. As convenient as this may have seemed for them, it limits the ability to acknowledge the extent of the impacts of racism, as well as reliance on strategies that fail to disturb our understanding of racism allows for systems of oppression to remain unchallenged. To help promote this willingness to be disturbed, we created antiracist activities that included everyone in the writing center, simply because antiracist work has to be done at every level of the writing center. According to Greenfield and Rowan, "[W]hen we leave race out of the discussion, we allow tutors the opportunity to remain unmindful of how their writing advice may be racially biased. When we fail to help tutors recognize and interrogate standardized conventions, we inadvertently cast tutors in the role of assimilationist guides" ("Beyond" 130). To this end, we asserted the importance of mindfulness "of the culture of the writing center, its identity across campus and in the community," that demands attention to the writing center's presumed role of assimilating students into academic and institutional conventions ("Beyond" 130).

Collecting future workshop participants' stories as the basis for practice scenarios helped us address multiple aspects of the problems we encountered. Incorporating this strategy into our praxis allowed us to learn from narratives that did not center whiteness, as Matias warns against, in a way that was grounded in the participants' own contexts. Conveying to OSUWC participants that the scenarios upon which the activity was based emerged from the stories of their colleagues imbued these sessions with a sense of urgency and purpose. Additionally, we hoped that involving participants in the creation of workshop materials would promote their sense of belonging in the antiracist conversation and would facilitate their sense

of responsibility for contributing to an antiracist space. Most importantly, focusing the discussion on these emergent stories helped participants to generate strategies that would fit within their own contexts at OSUWC.

Conclusion

This praxis provided us with insight that informs our path as we move forward. In particular, we applied these revisions in fall 2018 orientation workshop sessions for incoming writing center consultants as well as new and returning instructors teaching first-year composition courses. Additionally, we hope to apply these insights as we seek to make TJP a campus-wide initiative by working with groups of staff and faculty whose work with students pertains to race, discrimination, and other social justice issues.

To develop and assess the workshop, TJP intends to consider the impact of the workshop on writing center occupants' willingness to engage in conversation about issues of race and oppression, to question normative or long-held beliefs and practices, and to disturb spaces upheld by white supremacy with antiracist critique. We have continued to create resources and further training to provide sustained support for antiracist pedagogy, and we hope our contribution to the OSUWC through TJP will not only carve a long-term print on the minds of the OSU community but also have a substantial effect in many writing centers.

Our approach to the workshop treats the writing center as a locus from which to foster the cathartic repudiation of white supremacy in institutions. We believe not acknowledging racism (and our role in it) is a disservice to writing centers and the communities they serve. Inoue states, "For writing centers to be revolutionary change-agents in the institutions and communities in which they are situated. It means they facilitate structural changes in society, disciplines, and the institution itself" (Inoue). TJP, therefore, strives to offer a way to develop and disseminate an antiracist pedagogy that is inclusive and responsive to context.

Notes

1. The OSU Writing Center serves undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, staff, and the community surrounding the predominantly white institution (PWI). The OSUWC staff consists of a faculty director, a full-time coordinator, and a full-time administrative assistant, and three groups of students which comprise the consultants: graduate teaching assistants from the English Department (~30-40);

undergraduates of various majors (~X); graduate teaching assistants from other departments (~5-10).

2. During the fall of 2017, Hillary led The CWP, a test version of a 3.5-hour workshop from which she collected data for her dissertation.

3. While TJP is distinct from CWP, the origins workshop are influenced by CWP, which are one-day, four-hour events that Hillary and the three collaborators conducted between September 2017 and February 2018. CWP applies principles from invitational rhetoric: equality, self-determination, and immanent value (Foss and Griffin 4).

4. Mentor groups are small groups of experienced and novice consultants that meet every other week for staff development, troubleshooting, and resource sharing.

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