

Chapter 11. (De)Centering Whiteness in Writing Center Assessment

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In summer 2020, we witnessed state-sanctioned murders of Black Americans at the hands of police, continued to grieve the tragedies of lives lost due to racism, and took part in protests in support of the lives of Black Americans against a backdrop of a presidential administration that encouraged White supremacy to maintain the violent, racist status quo. In our writing center at a large, research-based, predominantly White institution in the southeastern United States, we wanted to give a meaningful response to these moments, so in fall 2020, we implemented a new professional development curriculum that aimed to deepen writing center peer consultants' engagement with antiracism. We also invited them to use what they learned to assess our program's resources, such as training modules and workshop materials, from an antiracist perspective. Peer consultants worked alongside us to create a rubric that we hoped would identify antiracist values for our program; at the end of the semester, they used this rubric to conduct a programmatic assessment of materials and documents created by our office.

However, as we explain throughout this chapter, we did not implement a fully articulated antiracist assessment ecology. In writing this chapter, we follow Asao Inoue (2015) in defining assessment ecology from a "holistic" perspective, recognizing "the interconnectedness of all people and things" that can impact the judgment of language (p. 77). Had we taken this holistic perspective in our antiracist assessment project, we could have been more mindful of the ways Whiteness continued to assert itself, "without denying or eliding linguistic, cultural, or racial diversity, and the politics inherent in all uneven social formations" (Inoue, 2015, p. 77), including in our writing center. Instead, the rubric we created with our staff, as well as interactions among peer consultants, forwarded inclusivity rather than antiracism.

No doubt our positionality played a role in the outcome of our assessment efforts. Three of us were full-time administrators and one of us was a graduate

assistant. All four of us identify as White. Throughout this IRB-approved study, we reflected on the ways Whiteness influenced our project. The Whiteness of our institution and program also impacted our design for curriculum and assessment. In fall 2020, 77 percent of students at our institution identified as White. Nonresident aliens (the institutional term) were the second largest demographic, at 8 percent. Only 5 percent of students identified as Black or African American, despite the fact that nearly 27 percent of our state's residents are Black—a disparity the institution is working to address through recruitment, scholarships, and ongoing mentoring and support. When we implemented the curriculum, we employed 35 mostly White undergraduate and graduate peer consultants from various majors and programs.

In retrospect, we recognize that, despite our efforts to organize the curriculum to incorporate scholarship by BIPOC voices, we continued to center Whiteness by assuming peer consultants would be unfamiliar with the intersections among race, language, and writing, an assumption that ignored the experiences of our few BIPOC peer consultants. We put the onus on BIPOC peer consultants to do the extra labor of supporting one another rather than unpacking the White racial *habitus* that was at work within our writing center, as well as within writing center studies more broadly. We also privileged White peer consultants' agency, and our own comfort, when we failed to call out some peer consultants' tendency to deflect from discussing race by focusing instead on nationality or broad issues of inclusivity—a tendency we continue to wrestle with ourselves. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to move training and professional development to Zoom, which created another barrier for cultivating the empathy and relationships that are crucial for an antiracist assessment ecology.

Nevertheless, we share our experiences and materials in this chapter so program administrators might adapt the materials for their own local contexts while finding ways to be more deeply antiracist. We also aim to model and embrace a recursive and iterative process of program assessment that makes space for moments of reflection and failure. Such ongoing reflection is a crucial component of what Inoue (2021) called “an antiracist orientation” that casts “the meaning and significance of our work, ourselves, and lives” in specifically racialized terms so that we can continually work against racist systems.

Planning an Antiracist Curriculum and Assessment

Initially, we did not plan to focus specifically on antiracism in peer consultant professional development; we had planned to collaboratively design a rubric to assess the extent to which faculty reflected principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their writing assignments. We anticipated that peer consultants would need training in how to recognize different ways positionality plays out in language, consulting practice, and eventually assignment design, and we organized readings and activities to lay a broad DEI foundation, with attention to race, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, and multilingual writers.

As we were piloting the broader DEI curriculum with a subset of our staff, the events of summer 2020 unfolded—the protests, marches, and demonstrations about police violence and the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black Americans. Locally, Black students used social media to name their experiences of racism in our community. Then, a student-led group organized protests and crafted demands for the university administration, including increased funding for Black student support, promoting antiracism and justice in campus culture, better community education about race and racism, and structural changes to university funding and governance. Conversations and controversies about these proposals have been ongoing ever since, occasionally making their way into the press.

Given these contexts, we saw good reasons for centering professional development on race. We speculated that peer consultants would have few formal opportunities to discuss race in their coursework, and we anticipated that they would be eager to do so. We also recognized that BIPOC students represented a higher proportion of our writing center clients than our staff or the wider institution. Whereas 77 percent of students at our institution are White, about 62 percent of our clientele is White. Historically, the writing center has served approximately 5 percent of African American and Asian-American students at our institution, and 9 percent of Nonresident Aliens (again, the institutional term), compared with just 3 percent of White students. By centering race and antiracism, we hoped to be in a better position to support the learning and safety of our racially, ethnically, and nationally diverse clientele.

As we reflected, we also realized that we had neglected to fully consider the impact of our Whiteness on our programming. To what extent were we reflecting on our White identities and learning about and enacting antiracist principles ourselves? Our program is responsible not only for writing center consultations, but also campus-wide writing workshops and faculty development. No doubt our Whiteness influenced how we designed and ran these services, too. Just as Megan McIntyre writes in her chapter “One White Woman Stumbles Toward Equity in Student Feedback Processes” in part one of this collection, we wanted to go beyond just saying our writing center was inclusive because we personally valued inclusion; we needed to intentionally practice those differences to enact the changes we imagined. We realized we needed to pause external assessment and instead implement a process akin to an *equity audit*, which “specifically looks at policies, programs, and practices that directly or indirectly impact students or staff relative to their race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, color, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or other socio-culturally significant factors” (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 2021, p. 1). An equity audit promotes “an inquiry stance that asks teachers to be on the lookout for whose knowledge is of most (and least) worth, whose power (and oppression) is reinforced by how schools and classrooms are organized, and whose voices are included (and excluded) in decision making” (Dodman et al.,

2019, p. 7). In our case, we wanted to inquire into the ways our program's worksheets, handouts, training materials, protocols, and processes racialized writing and devalued or excluded BIPOC writers' language practices, knowledge, and voices. After all, to echo Inoue (2015), even materials that were not explicitly focused on White language practices still rendered judgments about language. When a workshop discussed the writing process, for instance, it was still teaching "reading processes [that] are writing processes, judgment processes," and therefore served as a site for reinscribing racism or practicing antiracism (Inoue, 2015, p. 154). Therefore, we set out to design a professional development curriculum that investigated the intersections among race, racism, antiracism, language, and writing, with the goal of naming antiracist practices and policies that we could implement in our program. A weekly schedule of readings, key terms, and central questions is included in the Appendix.

This new focus immediately felt like a better fit for supporting peer consultants' agency: they could learn more about our goals and activities beyond the writing center, and, by providing feedback to us, potentially develop a greater sense of ownership over our activities and how we represented and engaged with students, and especially students of color. In this way, we could reorient power, and peer consultants' labor, towards antiracism, inviting them to "problematize the judgment of discourses and language" in the writing center and in our programmatic materials (Inoue, 2015, p. 124). However, as we will show, our original DEI focus, as well as our own and our staff's Whiteness, continued to creep back into our assessment ecology in ways we did not anticipate.

Curriculum Overview

To prepare peer consultants to collaboratively design a rubric and perform the assessment, we wanted to give a foundation in antiracism and maximize their learning within the limited hours allotted for professional development. Our core means of ongoing, paid professional development included weekly meetings, either as an entire staff or in "circles" (Marshall, 2008) of five to eight consultants, which we held on Zoom in fall 2020. Peer consultants prepared for these meetings by reading writing studies scholarship or completing hands-on activities with sample student writing. They typically did this work when they were on the clock between appointments, so we limited the number and length of readings and activities required during any given week.

The semester began with a rationale for the curriculum, utilizing local exigencies as well as scholarship that articulated the need for antiracism in writing centers (Geller et al., 2007). The full staff of administrators and peer consultants met to define terms and reflect on their reactions to the semester-long focus on antiracism. We also reflected on our identities, especially our racial positions (Aikens, 2019), by working with one of our institution's DEI specialists on identity and allyship and by reading about White privilege (McIntosh, 1990). Each

week thereafter, peer consultants completed readings focused on BIPOC voices and writing center theories that took up race and antiracism. These readings were the most visible parts (Inoue, 2015) of the assessment ecology we were building. We included readings that we thought were best positioned to offer ourselves and peer consultants an antiracist praxis for program administration, tutoring appointments, and the assessment of our program materials.

Circles included other peer consultants, a lead consultant, and an administrator, with the lead consultant and the administrator facilitating discussion. During each circle meeting, circles discussed the reading(s) while lead consultants took notes on a common document. These notes traced discussion topics, key concepts, peer consultants' reactions to the materials, and thoughts on how we might apply what we were reading in consultations, programmatic protocols, or conversations about writing across campus. Early on, these notes served as products of the assessment ecology, a record of "the learning that occurs because of the ecology," but, as we explain below, they also were "circulated back into the ecology as parts" (Inoue, 2015, p. 158) because they fed into the rubric, which we developed collaboratively with peer consultants in the final four weeks of the semester.

Because peer consultants' demographics closely resembled those of our predominantly White institution, we wanted discussions of readings to raise awareness of the ways the writing center mostly mirrored the predominantly White spaces in our university. In an effort to provide evidence of the ways that BIPOC writers experience racism through writing instruction and evaluation, we included BIPOC scholars who wrote about their traumatic experiences as testimony to White consultants. These decisions were centered on the learning experience of our White consultants, and we failed to consider BIPOC peer consultants, who we believe were already aware of the coding of academic spaces as White.

We attempted to mitigate harm to BIPOC consultants by establishing empathy as a common value and setting ground rules for the semester. We urged our staff to practice empathetic listening, which we defined as a practice of seeking to understand someone else's perspective and communicating back with understanding, without judgment, to build goodwill and clarify meaning. Although we think this definition is basically true, it sidesteps the potential contradiction in asserting nonjudgmental listening when the writing center is inherently in the business of judging language. In writing center studies, this conversation typically takes the form of a debate over directive versus nondirective feedback, which we had discussed with peer consultants in prior semesters. In asserting this definition of empathetic listening, we missed the opportunity to open a conversation about the role of racialized judgments in the ways we listened to one another. Our definition of empathetic listening also missed the embodied nature of empathy and compassion. According to Inoue (2019), "*feelings of empathy follow actions*," including "[b]odily position, eye contact, touch, [and] the movements we make" (p. 185, emphasis in original), all of which were difficult

to enact on Zoom with many peer consultants' cameras off. We also shared the following ground rules:

- No one is required to speak for an entire group.
- Everyone deserves space to pause and reflect.
- Focus on words and behaviors, not people.
- Give the same level of attention you want to receive.
- Err on the side of calling in instead of calling out.
- Everyone should feel empowered to enforce these guidelines.
- Everyone should feel empowered to offer new or propose changes to these guidelines.

As with our definition of empathetic listening, we think these ground rules are basically good ones, but, aside from an invitation to discuss or add to them during our first staff meeting, we never made them a key touchstone for discussion and reflection during the semester. Inoue (2019), in contrast, invited students to an intellectual process of “making lists of behaviors and actions that will encourage a culture of compassion” (p. 177), and then “each week we vote on two or three compassionate actions we’ll most focus on in our work that week” (p. 178). Without this kind of active, reflective practice, we believe some enacted a polite professionalism characteristic of White culture.

Indeed, as the semester progressed, Mila, a peer consultant of color, told us that our project carried an emotional toll; we believe that our centering of Whiteness greatly impacted her experience during the professional development process. We didn’t adequately consider what we wanted BIPOC peer consultants to learn through this experience or the emotional impact of witnessing White peers deflecting conversation away from antiracism or doubting some claims in the assigned literature. Our curricular choices assumed a White audience, emphasized that BIPOC learners experience oppression, and did not include enough celebration of BIPOC identities and linguistic diversity. Wonderful Faison (2019), for instance, urged writing centers to recognize “Black Language and linguistic oppression” alongside the myriad ways Black consultants “form solidarity through Black Language” practices such as musicality and nonverbal communication (para. 43). For Faison (2019), essential discussions “on Black Language . . . as a benefit and not a detriment in writing,” as well as issues like “gender and power dynamics, cultural insensitivity, and the power of names and naming” (para. 35) can open writing center spaces to antiracist orientations towards language.

In addition to the emotional toll placed on our BIPOC peer consultants, our curriculum lacked full representation of Black language in writing studies and exposed our own unfamiliarity with the canon. In retrospect, we could have better celebrated diverse, racialized language practices by incorporating materials such as April Baker-Bell and colleagues’ (2021) *Black Language Syllabus*, which aimed “to *celebrate* the beauty of Blackness and Black Language, *fight* for Black

Linguistic Justice, and *provide* critical intellectual resources that promote the collective study of Black Language” (emphases in original).

Designing an Assessment with Peer Consultants

In the penultimate circle meeting, we began with a modified version of dynamic criteria mapping (DCM; Broad, 2003). Peer consultants read through the notes from each other’s circles (now serving as ecological parts) in a shared digital document and began to identify patterns of repetition, similarity, and contrast across the circles, an activity Chris adapted from David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen’s (2011) *Writing Analytically*. With this activity, we missed a crucial opportunity for critical reflection on the circle notes, which reiterated inclusion and centered Whiteness through avoiding naming race, racism, or antiracism. Thus, we enabled a White racial *habitus* to feed forward into the ecological assessment process.

The following week, peer consultants created visual concept maps (The Learning Center, n.d.) that illustrated how they conceptualized the relationships among recurring ideas they identified in the shared document. During the final circle, peer consultants compared their individual maps and reconciled them into a single map representing their circle’s ideas. Our goal was to help peer consultants see how these recurring ideas related to antiracist values. Concept maps can aid assessment efforts because they visualize the relationships among values and concepts that circulate in an assessment ecology.

In one map, peer consultants identified recurring ideas around empowering writers, like respecting a student’s authority over their own voice, giving them an informed choice for making language decisions, and instilling confidence in their voice and writing. While we appreciate these values, we are concerned that these concepts are not inherently antiracist, especially in the absence of explicit acknowledgment of the impact of racism on empowerment. For instance, students may see SEAE as the only valid language form in academia, a learned perspective which limits use of their own voices and dialects. In seeking to empower writers, peer consultants should be aware of how race shapes their own and others’ thinking, choices, and pathways to empowerment. An antiracist orientation to mapping should involve examining conceptual relationships and bringing racialized tensions to the forefront of our observations for examination and critique.

In the final weeks of the semester, we reconvened as a full staff and began a collaborative effort to craft an antiracist assessment rubric from the maps. We began by soliciting ideas for top-level rubric categories before a staff meeting, using a shared online document. During the staff meeting, we split peer consultants into breakout groups and asked them to develop potential criteria for each category. Between staff meetings, we condensed and clarified peer consultants’ draft criteria so the rubric could be used more easily. In the final staff meeting, we shared a new version of the rubric, solicited revisions, and asked peer

consultants to practice using the rubric to evaluate materials from our Personal Brand in ePortfolios workshop. Based on that experience, we then revised the rubric a final time in preparation for assessing program materials in an assessment institute.

As one of our peer consultants would later point out, the creation of a shared rubric had benefits and limitations. DCM helped peer consultants collaboratively develop rubric criteria, and the rubric became a usable tool for assessing program materials. However, at the end of this process, we were led to question how well a rubric could create the programmatic change we initially imagined. As Faison wrote in her chapter in this collection, “Speaking Truth to Power (Or Not): A Black Teacher and Her Students on Assessing Writing,” we should strive to create rubrics that affirm linguistic diversity; however, that is difficult when rubrics are often used to enforce common standards. Inoue (2015) argued that rubrics are only one part of a wider assessment ecology; rubrics often reinscribe “a dominant White racial *habitus*” (p. 127), but they are not the sole cause of that *habitus*, which is equally reinforced via other elements of the ecology. Indeed, we can see a White racial *habitus* at work in the top-level rubric categories we developed with our peer consultants:

- Empowerment through agency over writing choices
- Welcoming learning environment
- Inclusive and diverse representation of writers and languages

These categories retreat into comfortable, Whiteness language, rather than directly naming the ways racist systems circumscribe empowerment, render BIPOC students’ languages unwelcome, and tokenize diverse representation to avoid deeper change. As White administrators, we have learned that we need to continue to facilitate conversations and engage in training specific to antiracism, as well as find new ways to disrupt racism and address the limitations of our own thinking.

Assessment Institute Overview

At the conclusion of fall 2020, seven peer consultants chose to assist in a programmatic assessment of our office using the rubric created through the professional development curriculum. These peer consultants participated in a paid Assessment Institute over two half-days, during which they applied the rubric to programmatic materials, including workshop presentations, handouts, and writing center training materials. We wanted the Assessment Institute to flip the assessment narrative by empowering peer consultants to assess and evaluate our materials, inform the work of our office, and contribute to a larger conversation about the institutional culture of writing.

On day one, we began by reviewing the reason for the Assessment Institute—an effort to evaluate and elevate our office’s enactment of antiracist principles in workshops, trainings, and resources—as well as key takeaways from the

semester's professional development readings. Then, we reviewed the rubric and, as a group, practiced applying the rubric to our oral communication workshop materials, after which we discussed both the materials and peer consultants' experiences using the rubric.

On day two, peer consultants practiced using the rubric once more on the same set of materials. During this "dress rehearsal," they followed the protocols for scoring materials individually and then adjudicated their scores in groups of three to four. To preserve multiple, possibly conflicting viewpoints, we collected both individual and group scores for the documents. At the end of the day, we reconvened the groups and held a debrief discussion of their experiences and insights. Peer consultants also completed a post-survey and follow-up interview. We reflect upon their artifacts and voices below.

Based on their feedback, we made meaningful revisions to program materials. Peer consultants suggested we more clearly name and discuss the tension between honoring students' voices and the real pressure they might feel to conform to SEAE and help students advocate for the use of their own language with faculty. We have also included more explicit recognition of racialized systems of privilege, power, and language.

Still, in conveying the findings of what is an imperfect project, we want to emphasize that the shortcomings of this project matter just as much as the successes. Neisha-Anne Green (2018) wrote that White folks in the room need to "stop being an ally; instead be an accomplice" by "support[ing] and help[ing] through word and deed" and "tak[ing] the risk" (p. 29). We had taken a risk in undertaking antiracist work in our program and had attempted to sacrifice some privilege as administrators by giving over materials to peer consultants for antiracist critique. However, we failed to incorporate practices that centered the experiences and needs of our BIPOC peer consultants, and we did not adequately challenge our own and White peer consultants' recurrent tendency to defer to a more comfortable DEI vocabulary instead of an antiracist one. To be the accomplice Green called us to be, we see as an initial step a need to acknowledge imperfection and even failure with humility as we continue to center antiracism in our professional development, programmatic resources, and policies.

Student Voices on Inclusion and Antiracism

The voices featured in this section speak to the tensions, successes, and limitations we observed in peer consultants' responses to the curriculum. While we do offer some commentary on the trends we see in peer consultants' thinking, this section centers on their range of thinking and learning over the semester. The majority of peer consultants who participated in the study are White women. All names used in this section are pseudonyms.

While we did not observe widespread resistance to the curriculum, Mila described a moment in a circle meeting that we interpret as a White peer consultant

resisting concepts such as systemic racism:

I remember that there was one point where someone, um, in my circle had said something in response to something I said about an article, and this person thought that the article we read was being very discriminatory against White people—and I was like, I don’t—I disagree. But I said that in my head. I felt very—I felt very uncomfortable [pause] calling that out because [pause] it’s hard to be the only person of color in a group, especially in a group where you’re like, I still have to work with these people next semester. [brief laugh]. (Post-Interview)

In response, Mila described feeling as if she were “walking on eggshells around topics as to not make people feel discomfoted or upset” in circle discussions about racism with White peers. Mila discussed this moment with the administrator of her circle following the meeting, but this did not result in change to circle discussions. This showed the reality of the racial trauma that occurs even when professional spaces are intending to do antiracist work (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). As we previously discussed, we did not adequately support our ground rules with discussions centered on a compassionate ethic, which Inoue (2019) argued can support bravery in the face of discomfort: “Knowing that everyone is trying to be compassionate in our mutual labors makes it easier to be brave, rather than comfortable” (p. 170). Some peer consultants acknowledged the necessity of empathy and contemplation over the semester, but we did not engage the staff as a whole in the work of practicing a compassionate ethic. As White administrators, it was our duty to be aware of the potential for racial trauma, implement compassion practices, facilitate conversations on brave spaces at the very beginning, and then revisit these conversations regularly, so that peer consultants like Mila felt supported in speaking out rather than afraid of upsetting others.

The rest of this section speaks to unevenness across peer consultants’ conceptual and practical understanding of antiracism. As mentioned previously, some White peer consultants struggled to differentiate antiracism, specifically, from inclusion more generally, which we attribute to the gaps in the antiracist assessment ecology we have discussed. For example, in her final reflective prompt, Mary described this blanket inclusivity with the context of consulting, writing that “being inclusive and treating clients equally means preparing resources that are applicable to many different types of appointments/projects and accessible to every client,” including “those who may be overlooked otherwise.” This trend in the responses often took up ideas of equal or “fair” treatment and the recognition that everyone was different; those ideas did not get beyond meritocratic perspectives.

To overcome the tendency towards inclusivity, reflective questions can create opportunities to “unmask the difficult dialogue” by providing pointed challenges, questions, and commentary to individual responses (Sue, 2015): What are the differences among fairness, equality, and equity? Where do your ideas about fairness,

equality, and equity come from? What do they look like in practice? What does unfair and unequal treatment look like? In your experience, who is typically the beneficiary of fairness? Who isn't? What about equality and equity? And, more directly, what role might your race play in your notions of fairness, equality, and equity? These conversations might reveal that "fairness," from the perspective of a White racial *habitus*, involves judging everyone according to SEAE. Within that same *habitus*, we might read equality as "equality of opportunity," as giving students the same course materials, assignments, and writing center services, and then assuming it is up to the individual student to succeed. From an antiracist orientation, we might recognize how these terms mask inequities, such as uneven access to and facility with SEAE that renders a single language standard distinctly *unfair*. We might also discuss what it might mean to judge all languages as inherently worthy and valid, despite racist assumptions about the worth of Englishes other than SEAE.

Other peer consultants made connections between oppression and language but did not always distinguish between race and nationality. Many mentioned applying what they learned from antiracist scholars to their appointments with multilingual writers, the majority of whom are international students (BIPOC and White) at our institution. In her post-interview, Emily said the "international students" she worked with often "want to sound professional or they want to sound natural," and she said she had developed strategies to affirm them by explaining, "it's okay to sound like you're from wherever you're from like that, as part of your identity, I don't want to completely like take away your voice." Emily's affirmations can function as a form of advocacy for international students. Her references to "professional" and "natural" sounding language represented a common tension consultants experienced between, on the one hand, acknowledging the White supremacist structures that perpetuate a right/wrong approach to grammar, and, on the other hand, supporting students' own goals and their academic success.

Future conversations should equip peer consultants to navigate conversations about structural White supremacy in language by sharing the origins of ideologies about professionalism and fluency, discussing the realities of the system that privileges White, academic language practices over others, and co-creating a solution alongside the student.

Similarly, in a reflection, Mary wrote, "the closest I have come to apply[ing] the information I have learned is when students with English as a second language have told me that their advisors are not understanding to this fact or call their writing 'wrong,' when really they mean that it sounds unconventional." She sought to "reassure them" by explaining "that their writing is not 'wrong' or 'bad' if it sounds different or their professor asks them to revise" (Reflective Prompt 3). Peer consultants like Mary seemed to consider language differences as valid, not the result of error. Still, we wonder if the move to discuss multilingual writers may be a way to avoid talking about the more uncomfortable topic of race and

its impact on consulting practices. We could redirect their attention back to race by, for example, asking how these realizations about multilingual writers might intersect with “model minority” stereotypes about Asian-Americans; how Black Americans might receive different criticisms from professors compared with international students; or even how differently racialized assumptions might underlie the same feedback.

We also attribute the conflation between antiracism and inclusion and race and SEAE fluency to another element of the assessment ecology: we believe that many of our White peer consultants had never had another opportunity to think critically about racial difference, privilege, and systemic forms of oppression before participating in our professional development. As Inoue (2015) wrote, “People, social pressures, and institutions define the purposes of writing assessment ecologies” (p. 138), so when White peer consultants and administrators do not have the experience, opportunity, or tools to investigate their own positionality, and especially to name their own Whiteness, they will bring the concepts to which they have been exposed in the past. That said, our peer consultants’ interviews and reflections showed many of them confronting their privilege and engaging in important self-reflection.

For example, we saw some changes in Caty’s understanding over the semester. In her second reflective prompt, she wrote, “I need to not automatically assume that Standard English should be used. I learned in the articles about code meshing that I should always tell students that not one form of English is more valuable than others, and that they should be able to write in whatever dialect they please, but that I would be happy to help if they do wish to conform to Standard English for their own reasons.” While we were pleased to see Caty recognize the value of code-meshing and multiple Englishes, we remain troubled that the larger context of academia puts the onus on writers—and the peer consultants who help them meet their goals—to “conform” to SEAE. In fact, recognition of academia’s insistence on SEAE and a desire to empower writers to succeed within existing structures appeared to leave consultants feeling unsure of what may constitute an antiracist orientation to consulting. To be sure, non-directive, writer-centered approaches to consulting are *de rigueur* in most writing centers, and for good reason—they invite students to take up agency—but without an antiracist orientation, they risk perpetuating racist systems and assumptions about language. A writer-centered approach may perpetuate a “one right way” approach to what should be a collaborative and responsive space (Okun, 2021), one that involves both the client and the peer consultant in a complex process of collaboration and dissensus, especially when racist ideas and language practices become a point of discussion (Inoue, 2019).

Later in the semester, Caty seemed to wrestle with her own imbrication in racist systems. In her third reflection, she wrote, “I have learned that anti-racist writing consultation requires a lot of empathy, contemplation, introspection, and being uncomfortable. I have been forced to confront my own biases.” She

elaborated on this sentiment in her post-interview, when she explained, “I didn’t expect to, um, see everything that I saw within myself about like how much I was a part of the problem.” Even as we confront systemic injustices, we have internal work to do as well, since none of us is wholly separate from the systems we would like to replace.

While some peer consultants began to explain their newfound reflections on language and consulting practice, others seemed to express a sense of conflict. Bethany, for example, began her second reflection by noting “that the work of being anti-racist can be really complicated.” She explained that she agreed with the basic need for antiracism, but she was left with a number of unanswered, “moral” questions about the relationship between antiracism and academic writing:

Is it racist to ask writers to use certain set of grammar principles, or to conform to the standards of Mainstream American English? Is there a way to empower writers to do that without discriminating against their right to their own language? Is there any way for writers to find common ground of understanding each other while still staying true to their own flavors of English?

Rather than give Bethany clear consulting practices she might use to resolve such paradoxes, our curriculum seemed to show her “how deeply anti-racism has to cut in order for it to be true anti-racism” (Reflective Prompt 2).

By the end of the semester, some peer consultants’ reflections and interviews included clearer ideas about how antiracist work can be enacted in the writing center and across an institution. For example, while Bethany seemed to experience conflict towards the middle of the semester, she elaborated on her understanding of antiracism later on. In her final reflection, she explained that she used to think racism was simply a matter of “individual perspectives,” but came to understand that “systems have been built for so long on racist principles,” which means that “engaging with antiracist work involves rebuilding all of those systems and thinking critically about what is truly the best way to serve and equip and empower all students and all writing” (Reflective Prompt 3). She explained that the process of using readings to build and test the rubric had a direct impact on this realization because it required her to think concretely about the ways racist ideas might manifest in “tangible resources and documents.” We believe that the work of reexamining everyday practices from an antiracist lens invited growth in awareness of the systemic racism in which we are all existing.

While peer consultants’ reflections and interviews appeared to reflect growth in conceptualizing antiracist work in writing centers, they also revealed tensions—including institutional, programmatic, and cultural judgments of language—that hampered their ability to take antiracist action. Some peer consultants expressed readiness to take antiracist action in consultations, accompanied with uncertainty about appropriate moments for this work. Grace shared that she

envisioned antiracist consulting as a response to expressed racism: “My thought had been, you know, if . . . my client says something or is writing about something that could be related to our antiracism education, then I could be like, ‘Oh, this is just like this thing that we’re learning and you should know.’ But I didn’t have any papers like that” (Post Interview).

Additionally, peer consultants seemed worried about how writers would perceive them if they were to confront a writer’s racism; Caty shared, “it’s a delicate balance I guess, between not wanting to be rude to someone, but also not wanting to like just let something like that go, because . . . that’s going to keep contributing to the system that they’re benefiting from” (Post Interview). Caty appeared to have a tacit understanding of the “right to comfort,” a feature of White supremacy culture that centers the comfort of those in power (Okun, 2021). These tensions highlighted by peer consultants identify the difficulty of doing antiracist work without a thoroughgoing antiracist assessment ecology, the partnership of the full institution, and opportunities to improve the curriculum to help peer consultants conceptualize “how antiracism permeates through everything” (Caty, Post Interview).

While several peer consultants identified tensions that hampered their antiracist action, they also identified practical, antiracist strategies they could use during their consultations, like addressing issues of systemic racism that impact clients’ writing choices (Anthony, Reflective Prompt 3) and celebrating the “ideas and unique expression[s] of language” by clients who may “have been belittled for their writing in the past” (Becca, Reflective Prompt 2). Mila, for instance, emphasized talking with clients about antiracist citation practices. In her post-interview, she told us,

I think words have power, [pause] and [pause] writing serves as a medium for those who are either unable to speak about it or are forced to write about it, to communicate ideas or beliefs in, you know, their own way, and I think that carries across with anti-racism in actively searching for and choosing research done by people who don’t look like you. Or, if you are gathering testimonies for something, make sure to gather testimonies from everyone, and not just the people you sit around.

Similarly, Sophia found cause not only to recognize linguistic variety, but also to celebrate it:

Sometimes it’s realizing like, oh, this is how this person legitimately expresses themselves and like that’s their writer’s choice and, like you not only have to respect that, but like try to learn, like the beauty of that and, like why they chose it and, like listen to their perspective on like why that’s valuable to them and not just sit here and say like, oh I’m the superior one because I have the best grammar and the best punctuation knowledge and um,

you know, not . . . not prioritize like that um like Standard English above other legitimate forms of expression.

In this interview response, Sophia described the limits of SEAE and the legitimacy and beauty of other Englishes. In both Mila and Sophia, we see consultants who have tools they can use to expand writers' understanding of effective writing in ways that can have antiracist results.

Finally, several peer consultants mentioned the practice of "calling in versus calling out," a resource developed by Rebecca Haslam (2019) on interrupting bias by "calling out" intolerable words and actions and "calling in" to foster understanding and mutual learning. In his post-interview, Anthony told us,

I was able to use [calling in] I think during like one consultation, where like someone had where did something questionably that seemed like not the kindest towards like poor communities and like majority-minority areas. And I was like, "Um . . . I think this is how it comes across. Did you mean it like this, or do you mean it like this?" You know, so kind of using that like "calling in" conversational aspect.

While Anthony practiced calling in, Mila grew more confident calling out racism. Reflecting on the past, she described herself as "complacent" in the face of racism because she felt she couldn't do anything about it. She described our curriculum and the Assessment Institute as helping her recognize opportunities to use her voice to call out racism:

And while I still think with most situations there's nothing I can actually do about it, there is a lot I can say about it. If I make enough noise eventually something will get done [nodding, laughing]. And so, yeah, I think I just came out of it with more confidence to be *not* [emphatically] okay with things not being okay. Rather than always being okay with things not being okay. I think that's the biggest thing I came out of this with. (Post Interview)

We interpret Mila's increased confidence to voice her beliefs about racism as a commitment to practicing calling out. However, not all peer consultants were similarly positioned. Mila did not have as far to go as many of her White peers to understand the inexorable power of systemic racism. Peer consultants' spectrum of beliefs speaks to the fact that antiracism is an ongoing practice that requires attention, reflection, and multiple angles of approach.

Parting Reflections

To be frank, we initially worried about our ability to do this work as a WAC/WID program at a predominantly White institution that employed student workers

from across the disciplines. We wondered if we could engage with antiracist scholarship deeply enough within the time constraint of one hour per week across a semester to see how the theory can inform their practices. Despite constraints in timing and context, we feel antiracist professional development can be done in staff and circle meetings. We hope similarly positioned writing centers will take up this work. We also want to add some words of caution.

First, we did spend significant time defining terms, revisiting core ideas and values, and unpacking some of the more complex ideas in the readings. We found that White peer consultants needed redirection throughout the semester, whether that was a review of key concepts and ideas or a reminder of how linguistic values connect to legacies of systemic racism. These challenges have been echoed in Dan Melzer's (2019) article on negotiating White privilege in tutor education.

However, in taking these steps to ensure White peer consultants were learning, we failed to deeply consider how recurring introductory conversations and expressions of resistance and racist ideas would affect BIPOC peer consultants. Mila expressed hurt and frustration from a conversation that took place during a circle meeting. Prior to the semester, we had discussed exempting students of color from professional development and grouping all peer consultants of color into a single circle, but we rejected these ideas, lest BIPOC consultants lose out on work hours or be segregated from their White peers. Ultimately, we decided to offer additional opportunities for peer consultants of color to come together in community and solidarity to discuss their experiences with the curriculum. These opportunities included periodic meetings with Chris to discuss how they were experiencing the curriculum, as well as an invitation to meet separately—without a White administrator present—to support one another. However, none of these solutions is satisfactory. Rather, they are further examples of the ways we continued to center Whiteness: we put the onus on BIPOC peer consultants to take on the extra labor of informing a White administrator about their experiences and struggles with the curriculum, as well as the extra labor of finding time to meet with one another in an affinity group and decide for themselves how they would use that time productively. Compassion and mutual support became their responsibility, not ours or our entire staff's. Reflection on their racial positionality became their responsibility, not White peer consultants'.

We also saw the tendency to slip from topics of race and racism into broader discussions about multilingualism/translingualism, inclusion, and intersectional identities, even before we noticed the trend in the student voices included above. In the most striking example of this tendency, race does not appear on the rubric, despite its focus in the curriculum. Put simply: it is not an antiracist rubric. We had not set up a thoroughgoing antiracist assessment ecology, so we were unable to lead our staff to create one. We had prioritized the agency of our predominantly White staff by following their lead when they named categories and criteria that were more broadly inclusive. And to be honest, we accepted the polite substitution of inclusive practice for the messier and more difficult topic of racism.

Whiteness has a powerful influence over our curriculum design, assessment, judgment, and thinking in general. Like our consultants, we still find ourselves sliding along a range of orientations towards antiracism, some days vocally committed, other days retreating to the safer language of inclusivity. To aid us in this work, we continue to follow the expertise of BIPOC scholars in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies; specifically, we have learned from scholarship by Shelia Carter-Tod, Sherri Craig, Wonderful Faison, Genevieve García de Müeller, Laura Gonzales, Neisha-Anne Green, Natasha Jones, Zandra Jordan, and Asao Inoue. We also continue to refer to lists by Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyay (2021) and Andrew Hollinger (2021), which feature multiply marginalized and underrepresented scholars and antiracist pedagogies.

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Appendix: Curriculum Timeline

Week 1

Central question: What is the role of a writing center in practicing antiracism?

Key terms: racism, antiracism, institutional racism in education, systemic oppression, intersectionality, BIPOC, empathetic listening

Reading: Geller, A.E., et al. (2007). "Everyday racism: Anti-racism work and writing center practice."

Week 2

Central questions: How do our identities affect how we see the world? How can we discuss racially charged issues with care and intentionality?

Key terms: Identity, inclusivity, allyship

Speaker: DEI specialist gave an introductory reflective workshop on identity, inclusivity, allyship, and terminology as well as strategies for discussing difficult issues of identity with care and intentionality.

Week 3

Central questions: What is White privilege, and how does it appear in the writing center? What strategies can we use to respond to racism?

Key terms: White privilege, calling out vs. calling in

Readings: McIntosh, P. (1990). "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack." Haslam, R. E. (2019). "Interrupting bias: Calling out vs. calling in."

Week 4

Central question: How have the writing center, institutions, and individuals perpetuated (or disrupted) the myth that there is one correct way of speaking and writing?

Key terms: Standardized Edited Academic English, linguistic diversity, internalized racism

Readings: Pattanayak, A. (2017). “There is one correct way of writing and speaking.”

Bell, S. (2017). “Whiteboys’: Contact zone, pedagogy, internalized racism, and composition at the university’s gateway.” (Excerpt: Section “Attachment to Error”)

Week 5

Central question: How do language and power intersect in specifically racialized ways?

Key terms: language, race, and power

Readings: Lyiscott, J. (2018, May 23). “Why English class is silencing students of color.”

Diab, R., Godbee, B., Ferrel, T. & Simpkins, N. (2012). “A multi-dimensional pedagogy for racial justice in writing centers.” (Condensed to focus on three scenarios from the text.)

Week 6

Central question: How can peer consultants recognize and challenge oppressive language when they see it?

Key terms: oppression, challenging oppression, racial diversity

Readings: Suhr-Sytsma, M., & Brown, S. E. (2011). “Theory in/to practice: Addressing the everyday language of oppression in the writing center.” (Converted into a handout.)

Baron, N., & Grimm, N. (2002). “Addressing racial diversity in the writing center: Stories and lessons from two beginners.”

Week 7

Central questions: How does grammar become racialized, and how does this impact students at the institution? How do diversity and antiracism statements challenge or perpetuate racism?

Key terms: grammar, racism, diversity statements

Readings: Inoue, A. (2017, Feb 27). “Is grammar racist?” Examine diversity and anti-racist statements by institutions, corporations, etc., and identify which ones work well and which ones do not.

Week 8

Central question: What is code meshing, and how might it inform conversations with clients?

Key terms: code meshing, allyship

Reading: Green, N. A. S. (2016). “The re-education 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.”

Supplementary reading: Young, V.A. (2011). “Should writers use they own English?”

Week 9

Central question: How might racially diverse clients feel invalidated during consultations because of assumptions about race and language? How might we validate and amplify their voices?

Key terms: voice, resistance

Reading: Isaac, R. (2018). “Sacred pages: Writing as a discursive political act.”

Week 10

Central question: How has the writing center operated as a White space, and what actions might we take to challenge the assumption that it is, by default, a White space?

Key terms: Whiteness, monoculture, monolingual

Reading: Alvarez, N. (2018). “On letting the brown bodies speak (and write).”

Week 11

Examine notes from circle discussions; identify patterns and begin dynamic criteria mapping (Broad, 2003).

Week 12

Individuals draft sample concept maps based on lists of values; create collaborative maps in circles.

Week 13

Begin collaborative rubric design by identifying rubric categories from DCM and drafting criteria to describe each category.

Week 14

Finalize criteria map and test on sample materials.

December 9 & 10

Post-semester Assessment Institute.