

# Chapter 5. Between the Hammer and Anvil: The Implementation of Anti-Racist Labor-Based Contracts and Critical Pedagogy Amid Political Tensions

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As an educator in the U.S. higher education, I often experience myself trapped under two pressures: a hammer and anvil. Students have power over me in their day-to-day resistance to my teaching and end-of-semester evaluations. Administrators have power over me in claiming particular theories and pedagogies to be the right ones and justifying what they do or request by mandated assessment regulations. This chapter is about this conundrum and the consequences of assessment that might hinder the learning experience of students and debilitate the minority teacher's critical pedagogy and growth as an educator. The assessment I discuss here is regarding a minority teacher's judgment of her students' writing, as well as the students' and administrators' judgment of the teacher and her pedagogy.

This chapter illustrates my experience as a racially minoritized teacher and foreigner in a non-tenured track (NTT) position in the U.S. White academy. While I narrate particular incidents that I encountered in my teaching, I don't aim to single out students and administrators, but rather point out patterns of White supremacy culture enacted in the U.S. higher education institutions. I center the chapter on my implementation of labor-based contracts, community-based learning, and antiracist writing assessment approaches in my writing courses amid political tensions with students, colleagues, and administrators within White supremacy culture. As I summarize, narrate, and highlight particular encounters, I rely on my memory and impressions about what students and administrators said, how they acted, and how I responded. I understand that my interpretations of and judgment about these encounters are influenced by a complicated rhetorical ecology that includes my background as a woman of color, an Arab/Palestinian, and a past student and teacher in Jordan, the country where I was born and raised. That background does not only influence my own interpretation of my encounters with students and administrators, but likely influences my values as a teacher, which might clash with students' and administrators' values and attitudes.

While I pursued my Ph.D. in rhetoric and professional communication, housed in an English department at a Southwest, R2 Hispanic-serving Institution (HSI), I struggled with students' resistance of me as a teacher, an authority of knowledge, and an expert in the subject matter who is not native to the language of writing that she teaches. Often my TA peers spoke about promoting democracy, negotiation of the student-teacher authority, and student agency in their classes. I, however, always felt their practices and pedagogies didn't apply to my situation simply because I had no authority in the classroom, to begin with.

I was always aware to some extent of my difference as a foreign body, although not fully aware of how White supremacy or White privilege operated in academia against me as a minority teacher and graduate student. As I progressed in my Ph.D. program and teaching I started recognizing that my students, colleagues, and administrators embodied an institutional White supremacy culture that perpetuates "The idea (ideology) that White people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of White people are superior to People of color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions" (Jones & Okun, 2001, p. 19). Within that culture, students and colleagues claimed to be harmed and injured whenever my pedagogy challenged White norms and standards, a response that I call a *rhetoric of injury*. This rhetoric of injury enacted daily violence that claimed me as a risky and violent body and injured *me* as a minoritized and racialized body in U.S. academia. Students, colleagues, and administrators claiming injury while causing it to me made the development and implementation of my teacherly mission very challenging in my classes. Below, I point out the rhetoric of injury that happens in White supremacy culture to minoritized teachers like me. Doing so reveals important questions that antiracist work attempts to address: who participates in the rhetoric of injury, how are they encouraged or validated for their participation, and why do so few people notice the injuries? In naming the rhetoric of injury, my goal is to highlight the structural oppression that affords such a rhetoric to circulate in the first place. In that sense, the concept is useful for both revealing and explaining such structural conditions. For White colleagues,<sup>1</sup> recognizing the rhetoric of injury is an invitation to contribute to effecting change in the world as collective and cumulative. I invite White colleagues to systematically act as allies to racially minoritized teachers who implement critical and radical pedagogies.

## Tensions of Student-Teacher Authority

I often faced resistance from students for implementing a critical pedagogy inspired by Paulo Freire's (1996) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where I engaged students in questions of identity, power hierarchies, positionality, intersectionality,

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1. For BIPOC, this might not be surprising or new to you, but I hope it would give you a chance to reflect on my experiences in a way that helps you approach similar moments in your lives productively while protecting your well-being.

and individual and collective responsibility. That is, my mission as a teacher has never been to prepare students for the job market or make them better writers per se, but rather to equip them with critical tools to enact citizenship and responsibility toward making the world a better place of living. But as a TA and later a postdoctoral fellow, my political agenda was subject to resistance by some of my students, who wrongly assumed rhetoric and writing to be apolitical, and by some colleagues and administrators who promoted different political agendas from mine in the classroom.

Becoming *Dr. Diab* for the first time among my colleagues and students felt empowering. I thought that my new academic title would resemble and grant me the authority of knowledge and expertise in the eyes of my students and administrators, which I felt I lacked as a graduate student in previous years. Moreover, beginning a postdoctoral fellowship in a Midwest R1 predominantly White institution (PWI) seemed like a promising move. At the beginning that felt true, I was amazed by my colleagues' hospitality. The faculty in the department seemed very friendly, welcoming, and responsive to my efforts to socialize with them. Tenured colleagues insisted that I was an equal peer. They invited me to the rhetoric and composition faculty meetings. Tenure-track (TT) faculty were open to communication and sharing advice as I began a new stage in my academic journey. Likewise, students in my two sections of professional writing showed politeness, respect, and motivation toward learning. They took notes, asked questions, and engaged in day-to-day learning activities.

As the semester started to progress, I started wondering whether students, in their apparent politeness and respect, were mainly motivated by and attached to grades rather than learning as I assumed. Students, for instance, often asked too many questions about minor things, which I perceived as a lack of critical thinking and fear of mistakes that might deduct points. When I noted to them these concerns, they expressed that I was disrespectful. My attempts to help students use reasoning and critical thinking to learn often upset students for not answering their questions directly. Take, for instance, this in-class group work-related scenario, where students needed to write a memo to a local non-profit organization that they've been working with to report their research findings:<sup>2</sup>

**Amanda:** Dr. Diab, in the memo, do we need to write the date when we write the memo or when we send it?

**Me:** What do you think? What purpose does the date serve?

**Amanda:** [immediately] I don't know, that's why I asked!

**Me:** Yes, I know that, but I want you to think of the rhetorical

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2. The dialogues in this chapter are meant to be illustrations of the kinds of interactions in my courses as I remember them with the limitations that any memory bears. The names I use to represent students are imaginary, and I chose them randomly.

reason for the date; I trust that with some thinking, you'll find the answer.

[Pause]

**Me:** Let's say that you finished the memo one day and then sent it to the reader one week after; what date would be appropriate to write on the memo and why? [Pause] What might the date mean to the receiver? Which date would be more helpful to them?

[At this point, the other two group members are agitated, rolling their eyes with sighs. The surrounding groups listen to the conversation.]

**Kayla:** [speaking to me with an upset tone and loud voice] She just asked you a simple question, so why don't you just answer it?!

From there, I got upset; I told them they needed to think for themselves and not think of genres as templates or equations. I reminded them that they were college students and that they wouldn't have their supervisor available to answer every question about every detail in the workplace. To students, the problem remained that I was confrontational and refused to answer a student's simple question, and they noted that in their course evaluations.

In another situation, I was talking to a senior student—who already landed a job—about his resume during an in-class workshop:

**Justin:** Dr. Diab, do I have to include my group work volunteering for the XYZ organization, which we did in this class?

**Me:** Yes, you do. This is already mentioned in the assignment sheet, and I also noted it in my feedback to you on your first draft.

**Justin:** But this is not how we learned to write resumes in business school! We didn't have to include coursework in our resumes.

**Me:** Well, there are several approaches to writing a resume. Here we're taking a different rhetorical approach. Also, remember, you don't need to portray your work with the organization as coursework; it was volunteer work, wasn't it? So you can include it under the "Volunteer Work" section because it relates to the job you're applying to in the assignment.

**Justin:** So, you want me to delete important work from my resume to make room for what I did in this class?!

**Me:** You're revising your resume for a particular job as an exercise. I understand your old resume worked for the job you just got, but you're writing this other resume in response to another job advertisement. After all, just do it for the sake of exercise. You can do whatever you want out of this class.

Although Justin resisted my authority and expertise beyond asking a simple question, I did my best to show the reasoning behind what the assignment entailed. In the end, Justin did what the assignment asked him to do, but I wondered: Was he being critically minded or open to trying something new, or was he simply avoiding a point deduction?

These repeated situations where students question my competency, pedagogy, and expertise and claim injury consume my time and energy and often drain my enthusiasm for teaching, even if only temporarily. Students often compare what I teach them with what they learned somewhere else. Given what I see around me (mostly White male and monolingual English faculty), I feel students' questioning comes out of my gendered and racialized embodiment. I do not match my students' expectations for what an authority figure or teacher is. While it might prove challenging to find the motives behind students' reactions, the fact remains that demographically, I was the only faculty member of color in rhetoric and composition in my department. As my students noted, faculty members of color in their higher education were minimal. By virtue of the demographics, White faculty members' presence and authority in the classroom become the norm, and anything else becomes abnormal. As Angela P. Harris and Carmen G. González (2012) put it: "not only the demographics but the culture of academia is distinctly White, heterosexual, and middle- and upper-middle class. Those who differ from this norm find themselves, to [a] greater or lesser degree, 'presumed incompetent' by students, colleagues, and administrators" (p. 3). In response to students' expressions of dissatisfaction and rhetoric of injury, I repeatedly explain to them that learning multiple approaches to tackle the same issue from various disciplinary points of view is necessary for college education. However, the classroom became a battlefield rather than a joyful and enabling environment of learning and growth.

Students' feedback in end-of-semester evaluations reflected the conflicts that occurred during that semester, maintaining themselves as victims to their teacher. I was aware of past research criticism of student evaluations for their potential bias against women, minority teachers, and teachers of color (Amin, 1997; Flaherty, 2018; Lilienfeld, 2016; Pittman, 2010). Yet, I wanted to improve as a teacher, and was eager to speak to someone from my department about my teaching experience that semester to advise me how to proceed and what to do differently.

On one occasion, I tried to speak to a White male senior tenured colleague about my students' feedback. His reaction was unintentionally dismissive: "We all receive bad evaluations." He probably meant to assure me that nothing was

wrong with how I taught, but I needed to voice my concerns without interruption. My tenured colleague's response ignored the material effects that the evaluations would potentially have on me, whether in impacting my mental health and teacherly performance or in affecting future job applications that might require student evaluations. I wished that he would acknowledge our differences in positionality, be more patient in listening to me, and offer concrete advice about how to deal with the situation. However, with that brief interrupted conversation, I felt the deep gap of privilege between the both of us.

My White colleague's response resembles the denial of White supremacy culture, a denial that a problem exists with how minoritized and racialized faculty are treated in the academy. American political activist, feminist, and professor Bettina Aptheker (2012) reminds us of that denial, arguing that although evidence is overwhelming about implicit bias against women faculty and faculty of color in academia, "[s]ome, who even declare themselves liberals or feminists, continue to deny every statistical, sociological, and political study of actual, verifiable discrimination based on race and/or gender" (p. xiii). My colleague's response equalized all faculty's experiences with student evaluations, thus dismissing the potential that my experience was related to the minoritized identity that I embody.

## A Radical Approach to Assessment

Among the cases where students challenged my expertise was their disagreement with my assessment of their texts. In many cases, students disagreed with their grades and often angrily negotiated. Although I assumed students' disagreements to be at least partially due to my positionality, I also felt my inherited assessment approach promoted conflict with students instead of motivating their learning and growth as writers. I found it problematic to be the sole authority in assessing students' texts, considering that different teachers will often assess the same text differently. It troubled me to construct and use rubrics as measures of the quality of texts when these rubrics fell short in accounting for the complexity of writing and judgment processes. These rubrics also promoted racist standards that disagreed with the cultural and linguistic heritages of many of my students. Considering that students' comfort levels and experience with academic writing varied, holding them all accountable for one set of expectations seemed to fail those who entered my classes least prepared for what I would teach them.

Given the field's questioning of conventional grading and assessments (Elbow, 1997; Tchudi, 1997) and discussions around rubrics in writing classrooms (Athon, 2019; Balester, 2012; Broad, 2003), several questions haunted me about the legitimacy of the teacher solely creating a rubric and assessing students' work:

- When I grade a text, am I assessing what a student learned in my class, or the knowledge/skills they brought with them?

- Outside of school, how helpful is it to divide the act of writing into categories, as we do with rubrics in classrooms?
- Do rubrics help students learn how to write? What if, in students' attempts to revise and meet the rubrics, their texts still don't meet the criteria I detail in the rubric?
- What if my students disagree with my own interpretation and judgment of their writing? What if they disagree with the rubrics I use, to begin with?
- How could I construct assessment criteria that would encourage students' growth as writers while shifting their attention from the grade to taking risks in their writing?

In my attempts to respond to these questions, I adapted and revised many of the sample rubrics passed on to me by the writing program administrator (WPA), composition scholars, and colleagues. Later, I tried to engage students in assignment rubric construction, as I learned in professional development workshops and conference panels. At some point, I experimented with the contract grading suggested by Peter Elbow (1997) and Jane Danielewicz and Elbow (2009).<sup>3</sup> Yet, I remained the sole authority of judgment, and students continued to resist my evaluation of their work.

Around that time, Asao Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* (2019) came out. I was eager to learn more about labor-based contracts and antiracist writing assessment. Although I was aware of Inoue's labor-based learning and antiracist writing assessment work through his publications and keynote speeches, his 2019 book provided me with clear, comprehensive, and legitimate answers and resolutions to my questions and concerns about assessment. It offered a strategy that responds to student resistance to my evaluations of their texts and engages students in writing as a social and collective process of revision and interaction.

Inoue (2019) foregrounds labor-based grading contracts as a fair approach for student assessment that refuses to use biased language standards as a measure of student success. While raising attention to the inherited structural bias and White supremacy in Standard English, Inoue introduces labor-based learning and community-based assessment as practices that promote antiracist writing assessment and equal access to grades in the writing classroom. Inoue suggests that students construct assessment criteria themselves from the beginning of their writing processes, and the teacher asks questions that challenge and help develop those criteria. Students continually revise these criteria while assessing

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3. Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) suggest an assessment model that combines no grades with grades to motivate student learning. They allow completion of assignments to grant students a grade up to B but then hold the authority as teachers to decide the quality of coursework that satisfies a grade of A. In implementing that model in two of my courses I found the approach didn't resolve the problem of rubrics and assessment because it kept the sole authority of granting the grade of A in the hands of the teacher.

each other's work throughout the semester. Inoue argues that shifting students' focus from the quality of the final product to the labor they invest in their writing makes grades equally accessible to all students and "allows . . . classroom assessment ecologies to engage in larger social justice projects" (2019, p. 3). All these arguments and others resonated with me and offered resolutions to my conflicting feelings and thoughts about writing assessment. I felt for the first time that I grasped an approach to writing assessment that seemed specific, pragmatic, and fair. The approach exemplified the social nature of writing and revision, critiqued inherited language bias, and facilitated more equitable access to grades. As a teacher of color and Arab woman who adopts critical pedagogy, I found that Inoue's approach resonated with my activist-scholar-teacher agenda. It allowed me to redirect my energy from arguing with students about their grades toward critiquing systems of oppression and engaging students in writing projects to challenge and contribute to dismantling these systems.

I recall starting reading that book online in the afternoon and continuing to read it on my phone, in bed, until three o'clock in the morning. That happened right before the Spring 2019 semester, when I was to teach in my second semester as a postdoc. The next morning, I started revising my two syllabi for a first-year writing course and an advanced expository writing course oriented toward non-native English-speaking students. Although I was excited about implementing the model of labor-based contracts and antiracist writing assessment suggested by Inoue (2019), I was also wary of possible consequences.

As a NTT faculty member, I was aware of my lack of power compared to the tenured and TT faculty. As a woman of color implementing antiracist pedagogy, I was aware of White supremacy culture in the U.S. academy and the rhetoric of injury and *White fragility* among my students, administrators, and colleagues. Robin DiAngelo (2016) defines White fragility as:

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate White racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. (p. 247)

Because an antiracist assessment approach would interrupt the racially familiar system in U.S. academia, I expected defensive moves and argumentation from my colleagues. I was wary of being perceived as the subordinate non-tenure-track colleague who brought a pedagogy that faulted other current pedagogies that reinforce Standard English. My expectations were especially charged by recent public attacks by senior scholars on the writing program administration listserv (WPA-L) against two established scholars, Vershawn Ashanti Young and Inoue



himself, for their theories and practices concerning code-meshing and antiracist writing ecologies. Therefore, whenever I talked to my colleagues about implementing the Inoue (2019) approach in my classes, I dropped off its antiracist aspect and focused on its labor-based learning side.

My past White students' reactions to my critical pedagogy and authority already resembled White fragility. Despite their different subject position within the academy, students still occupied a position of power, given the White supremacy culture in U.S. academia. Therefore, when I began implementing antiracist writing assessment in my classes, I expected from mainstream students defensive moves of anger and argumentation, which DiAngelo lists as symptoms of White fragility. Similarly to Wonderful Faison's experience articulated in Chapter 2 of this book, I expected students to perceive me as their main source of knowledge, which stood as a barrier against critiquing the racist roots of the very standard that they expect me to teach. I also anticipated multilingual students' investment in Standard English to learn how to write *properly* as an urgently and critically needed tool of power and success in academia.

Therefore, to better serve students and minimize potential conflicts with them and administrators, I did two things. I focused on the community-based learning aspect of the labor-based grading contracts instead of highlighting the antiracist aspect of it. I also included more opportunities for me to provide one-on-one feedback to students beyond what Inoue's (2019) labor-based approach suggested.

## Using Rhetorical Ecologies and Agency Theories to Co-Construct Assessment Heuristics

Informed by my life experience and research, I embody theories of rhetorical ecologies and rhetorical agency in my teaching. By rhetorical ecologies, I point to Jenny Edbauer's (2005) concept that recognizes "public rhetorics (and rhetoric's publicness) as circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" (p. 9). Resulting from rhetorical ecologies, I adopt theories of rhetorical agency<sup>4</sup> that perceive the capability of effecting change as emergent from many actors (humans and non-humans) over space and time (Bennett, 2010; Cooper, 2011; Herndl & Licona, 2007; Koerber, 2006; Latour, 1996; Miller, 2007). These theories, along with my critical pedagogy, help me show students the complexity of writing as a recursive process and social interaction and impact the assessment processes in my courses. By introducing simple articulations of these theories, I invite students to question the power hierarchy, in and out of the classroom, which

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4. I assign a textbook chapter, Diab (2016), concerning re-claiming agency in delivery and multimedia composition, which forward these theories in a simple way to first-year writing students. The chapter serves as an introduction to our semester-long conversations about collective agency and rhetorical ecologies.

influences the definitions of good writing, good writers, good students, and good teachers. As a result, a community-based assessment model becomes a productive collaborative and ecological model for leading the learning process in the classroom and contributing positive change in the world.

I present rhetorical ecologies as a dynamic system of various interacting elements, through which agency emerges. The dynamic system doesn't function by the movement of any singular element but rather from the whole movement of the elements together. In the context of the class learning community, I promote collective actions—including collective assessment—as a strategy to achieve our goals. The rhetorical ecologies model helps me explain to students why claims of individual capacities are not accurate and how these claims result in an unjust system of reward and punishment in the education system. Thus, the theory of rhetorical ecologies allows me to de-center the individual actor's authority in my classes, including myself, for the sake of collective actions and the community's well-being. That decentralization appears in multiple ways as my students and I enact it:

- I contribute the terminology and definitions of (late, complete, incomplete, ignored, etc.) adapted from Inoue (2019), while students collectively decide the consequences of each.
- I provide students with sample unconventional texts that don't adhere to White language standards. Students analyze and critique the texts to develop rubrics without attaching points to any criterion.
- Students exchange peer feedback using the rubrics that they created.
- Students evaluate the feedback that they receive from each other and from me in order to decide what feedback was helpful and what was not for their purposes of revision. They are not obligated to incorporate any feedback, including mine, rather asked to be intentional about their revision processes.
- Students decide what they found effective and ineffective in the rubrics and revise them accordingly as they draft and revise their texts.

Students act and contribute in multiple ways to the decision-making within our writing assessment ecologies. Their collaborative efforts evince how writing is a social and collective process, proving also to students why one expert person cannot account for the complexity experienced from a range of responses to their writing.

By the end of the first semester of implementing the labor-based learning approach, the experience seemed reasonable. In the self-growth letters and end-of-the-semester evaluations, in my two courses, 23 out of 34 students (70%) either found labor a better measure for their learning than the traditional way of grading or felt neutral about it. Noting their appreciation of the approach, students praised the fairness of the grading process, the boost of their sense of agency, the in-depth process of revision they experienced, and the creativity and risk-taking that the approach encouraged. However, 11 students (30%) disagreed with the

labor-based learning model and found the assessment approaches they grew up with more adequate. I found that result satisfying in my first attempt at implementing a new assessment approach, and I had anticipated that the approach would satisfy more students in the following semesters with some changes in response to student feedback and my observations.

## Backfire

One student who praised the labor-based learning approach in his self-growth letter and a final one-on-one meeting with me changed his mind when he received his failing grade. He attacked the labor-based learning contract detailed in my syllabus and appealed to administrators his C- grade claiming that he deserved an A. The appeal reached a particular colleague-administrator, a White female junior TT faculty member. When she spoke to me about it, I explained that the student submitted too many incomplete assignments, ignored others, and missed too many class sessions. Instead of investigating the legitimacy of the student complaint, the colleague, who reviewed the course syllabus, attacked the labor-based learning approach and my adequacy as a teacher. During two meetings with me about the appeal, the colleague shifted the focus from evaluating the student complaint to confronting me for not constructing rubrics that centralized thesis statements and topic sentences in judging students' work. She claimed that changing my pedagogy would save administrators' time by preventing future student complaints. She mentioned it was the first time she had received a complaint from a student appealing a grade implying something was wrong with what I did as a teacher. Thus, the administrator legitimized the student complaint although he contributed to negotiating the labor-based contract terms at the beginning of the semester, and agreed to the number of assignments and class sessions that he missed. The administrator also failed to recognize the power conflict between me as a woman of color and the student as an entitled man who believed he deserved an A despite his poor performance. Both the student and administrator enacted a rhetoric of injury exemplifying me, the teacher, as a body that causes harm to students by applying a learning approach that both the student and administrators rejected.

Malea Powell calls administrative rhetorics such as my colleague's "the second wave of genocide" (1999, p. 4). This violence, as Powell argues, is committed by Whiteness academics and administrators who judge by using a dominant White set of values and standards. While Powell speaks of genocide against Indigenous scholars in the US as treated in White academia, her argument remains true for scholars of color in general. My colleague ignored that only one out of 34 students complained about the labor-based learning approach in my two classes. She gave one male student the benefit of the doubt and assumed I was at fault before reviewing the situation thoroughly. She overlooked how the student injured my authority as an expert when he discredited my contribution to assessing his work,

even though I shared my authority with him and his classmates throughout the course assessment processes. My colleague's judgment of my pedagogy internalized White supremacy culture as the norm and minimized everything else to less than adequate. Demonstrating *White fragility* (DiAngelo, 2016), she attacked the theory, pedagogy, and teaching approach that I adopted when they disagreed with her White norm instead of accepting our differences as normal and healthy variation in the academy. In a way, her judgment expressed an injury of White values and rules that centralize Standard English in the teaching of writing.

Under pressure from the colleague administrator, I implemented changes in the next semester's syllabi. I assigned numerical grades to the major writing assignments and planned on designing rubrics myself with a focus on labor. However, later, I felt that I was giving in too quickly. Therefore, I requested a meeting with both the colleague-administrator and the WPA to present a scholarly case for my assessment approach. In preparation, I spent over 15 hours working on a conference-presentation-like handout indicating:

1. my concerns about assessment throughout my years of teaching,
2. the theory that governs the labor-based contracts approach, and how that theory connects to my pedagogy and teaching-related beliefs,
3. the process of how I adapted the approach and what I changed,
4. the way I implemented the labor-based learning approach,
5. what students said about the approach in their self-growth letters, final meetings with me, and end-of-semester anonymous evaluation survey, and
6. what I learned from my implementation and how I reflected on that to revise the next semester's course material.

While the WPA, a White male tenured faculty, showed satisfaction with the approach as a scholarly one informed by research and theory, the colleague-administrator continued to ridicule me and my approach without counter-theory or evidence. Despite the actual outcomes of my teaching as students' responses showed, she insisted that what I was doing was *utopian* and *nice* in theory, but wasn't going to work in reality. In spite of my presence, the colleague spoke to the WPA about me being the first postdoctoral fellow in the department and wondered if, from that time on, the department should show future postdoctoral fellows how to teach their courses. She also prompted me to *learn from other colleagues* in the department and across the university, implying that their approaches, most probably lacking focus on the antiracist aspect, are more adequate than the theories I embodied. She assumed my NTT position indicated the magnitude of my knowledge and expertise rather than acknowledging that White supremacy in academic culture continues to marginalize women of color by denying them TT positions.<sup>5</sup>

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5. See Harris and González. (2012, p. 2) for statistics about women of color in U.S. academia.

Although the WPA was respectful of me and my pedagogy, he didn't defend me against my colleague's attack. He didn't criticize her selectivity in paying attention to the individual student complaint as opposed to the majority of students' more positive responses. He didn't point out that her rhetoric insulted me, her claimed equal colleague in the department. Neither did he use his higher administrative authority to challenge her. His politeness toward the offending colleague resembles White supremacy culture, which according to Tema Okun (2001), prompts people to avoid confrontation and "open conflict" where pointing out a problem becomes the problem (p. 33).

In the next semester, I started avoiding teaching FYW courses because of all the institutional constraints that come with them. Likewise, I decided to avoid teaching multilingual writing courses. My colleague oversaw these courses, and I feared the potential of being pressured by her to follow pedagogies that I believe are colonial and treat second language writing as a response to students' language deficit.

## More than a Utopian Dream: Success Outside of First-Year Composition

In Spring 2020, I chose to teach a 200-level course of professional writing and a 300-level course of advanced expository writing oriented toward mainstream students. My experience in the first course was reasonably fine, but the second was magically productive, successful, and enjoyable for both students and me. The exemplary success of the labor-based learning contracts wasn't an imaginary or utopian fairy tale, as my colleague-administrator portrayed it, but it was a real experience. For the first time in my teaching life, almost all my students were fully open to learning and challenging themselves. Students were very responsive to my critical pedagogy, which prompted them to recognize their implications in the social construct of racism and oppression. Students showed eagerness to improve their writing and collaborate while working on social service-learning projects to make the world a better place for living.

I constructed the advanced expository class around digital rhetorics and multimedia composition for social change. Social justice, civic engagement, and community-based course projects have been all at the core of any course I taught since the fall of 2013. However, the labor-based approach provided a cohesive framework that allowed my pedagogy to center and prioritize service-learning among students over ranking and receiving a grade. As the semester progressed, students and I grew closer as community members. Students showed a growing appreciation of the labor-based learning and antiracist writing assessment. Several of them, from education majors, expressed that they would implement antiracist writing assessment and labor-based learning contracts in their future classes. Thus, I felt comfortable enough to share with students part of my narrative as a minoritized, vulnerable body in the predominantly White academy.

During that semester, the college of arts and sciences at my institution hosted multiple workshops and talks led by Inoue about labor-based learning and antiracist writing assessment. At one event, I was surprised to see the same administrator-colleague who attacked me for implementing the labor-based grading contracts in my courses, introducing Inoue before his keynote and praising his antiracist writing assessment approach. When Asao finished his keynote, I raised my hand to talk about my experience adapting and implementing Asao's approach in my courses. Without naming names, I hinted at how I faced administrative tension in my department. I critiqued those who attacked the antiracist approach behind closed doors and then praised it publicly. Then, I asked what White faculty in my institution should do so that NTT faculty and BIPOC faculty, like me, could implement critical pedagogies in their classes and receive credit for it. Several faculty from rhetoric and composition in my department were present, including the WPA and others whom I told about the pressures I was under by my colleague-administrator. All these faculty remained silent to my notes and question. None of them talked to me about it after the keynote.

In contrast with the faculty's silence, my students in the advanced expository course showed support and understanding when I shared the keynote incident as an example of oppression in academia. Students' positive attitudes toward my openness sharing my personal stories made me feel in place and in a community I belonged to. However, I wasn't delusional about that successful class experience. I was aware, as I am still now, that teaching is like any social phenomenon. It is ecological and interactive. We often define students, teachers, and pedagogies from within the binary of good or bad, but as rhetoric scholars, we should know better. As Edbauer (2005) illustrates, rhetorical ecologies are dynamic and in continued flux as they interact with each other. If we view the teaching-learning process as ecological, we should pay attention to the dynamic interaction among the teacher, students, pedagogy, political environment, curriculum, and culture. A teacher and students who are in harmony with each other in values, beliefs, and openness for cooperation might make a particular teacher, student, or pedagogy seem good at a time. But change one element, bring a few resistant students to the pedagogy and collaborative enactment of authority, and the whole class might become less meaningful or chaotic. Thus, I didn't imagine in that semester that I found the secret for teaching a successful class, nor did I think that the following classes were to be as satisfying to my future students or me.

## Students' Assessment of their Teacher

In my next semester, Fall 2020, inspired by Aja Martinez's *Counterstory* (2020), I revised the expository writing course material to promote counter-narratives as a strategy to resist dominant narratives. I designated each week to discuss a dominant narrative and potential counter-narratives about an issue of oppression. The issues included narratives around good/bad teachers focusing on structurally

marginalized teachers.<sup>6</sup> When students shared difficult personal experiences in their first project, I responded by speaking about my own experience as a minority woman of color, a non-native English speaker, and a non-American citizen in the U.S. academy. I also invited a guest speaker, Dr. Sarah L. Wibb, a Black American activist against colorism in the U.S. and an assistant professor in the Department of English and Modern Languages at the University of Illinois Springfield at that time, to talk about her activist and academic experience as a woman of color in the U.S.

I raised systematic problems by pointing out the end-of-semester evaluation surveys as oppressive tools against racially minoritized teachers in the White U.S. academy. To forward research as a crucial tool for asking questions and challenging assumptions, I used the departmental end-of-semester survey to analyze the assumptions or dominant narrative(s) behind the questions it contained. I asked students to conclude the research question that the survey aimed to answer. Many identified the research question as something along the line of: “How effective was the teacher in their teaching?” Then, I asked about the assumptions or dominant narratives behind the research question. My goal was to show the contradiction between views about learning/teaching as ecological and collaborative among students and teachers, and the end-of-semester survey that centralizes the teacher as the sole element that promotes or hinders the learning process.

Yet again, in the anonymous end-of-semester evaluations, some students critiqued me for sharing my personal stories. Students described me as being *inappropriate*, *unprofessional*, *unfit*, and making them feel *uncomfortable*. Some notes criticized my politics and complained that *not all students are liberal*. Despite my careful planning of the readings and lesson plans, some students expressed that my curriculum, especially the survey activity, attempted to make them feel guilty to give me better evaluations.

In my reflection on the students’ evaluations I wondered “have my personal stories confronted students with their White privilege and made them feel uncomfortable?” I asked, “Was it possible that students compared me to their White teachers, who might have appeared to be more professional and seemingly apolitical by not involving personal stories of vulnerability?”; “Did my narrated experiences, through my body and voice, contradict the image of the teacher as portrayed by White teachers who dominate academia?” At that time, I felt that my body became subject to daily violence by my students who continually enacted a rhetoric of injury as a result of the same pedagogy that I followed in the previous successful semester. The students I taught in the fall of 2020 were different from those I taught in the spring, and that change in the teaching ecologies changed the whole experience.

Dissatisfied students’ reactions might be better understood in light of the political climate that Trump’s presidency fostered starting in 2016. By the time

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6. I selected an array of articles from Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. (2012) and other readings to demonstrate women of color faculty’s experiences in the U.S. academia.

Trump was running for president for the second time, in fall 2020, a White supremacy culture had surfaced more pronouncedly. That culture allowed many people to express values and beliefs that they were less likely to show publicly before Trump's administration. That time witnessed a peak of that culture and police brutality against Black bodies. In the previous summer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a White policeman, Derek Chauvin, murdered a Black man, Mr. George Floyd, by pressing his knee on Floyd's neck for almost nine full minutes while one of the witnesses, a 17-year-old young woman Darnella Frazier, filmed the murder. Mass protests occupied the streets nationwide, and Trump and his supporters described many of these protests as riots. That description resembles White supremacy culture that values White bodies, property, and lives over Black bodies and lives.

Likewise, students in their harsh feedback rehearsed another kind of White supremacist culture violence against my alien body that was different from both their bodies and their other White teachers'. Okun (2001) argues that White supremacy culture dictates ways of thinking and doing that are damaging through its everyday presence, which at the same time is hard to recognize and identify. According to Okun, the characteristics of White supremacy culture that appear in various organizations include silence as a politeness act, where pointing out a problem becomes the problem itself.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, my pointing out structural problems in White supremacy culture in the U.S. academy disrupted students' peace and made *me* the problem, a dangerous, risky body that violates and causes injury to White(ly) students.

## On the Violence Inherent in the Rhetoric of Injury

When expressed in the end-of-semester evaluations, a rhetoric of injury gains more force as a violent act that injures me as a racially minoritized teacher and contributes to the "second wave of genocide" (1999, p. 4) that Powell points out in White academia. Administrators are likely to find in students' input evidence to support their attack of critical pedagogies. Thus end-of-semester evaluations continue to perform as oppressive political tools against women and racialized faculty, especially in institutions where no other tools for teacher evaluation exist, such as peer and administrators' reviews of the syllabi, learning activities, and teaching practices, or even teacher narratives of their teaching.

Whenever I am confronted with such rhetoric by my students, *I* feel injured. The injury gets into my skin. I feel a chill when I see an email from a hostile student in my mailbox. Even before I open and read it, I experience a fear of student attacks, and I feel vulnerable and subject to risk and harm. But these feelings are nothing to talk about with my colleagues. I can't take that risk when I have no mentors,

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7. See also Ahmed (2016), where she raises our attention that the feminist who points out a problem is considered in White feminist environments a "feminist killjoy" (p. 11).



supporters, or allies in my program to vent to or ask for advice. Whomever I reach out to, I do so at the risk of being looked down upon as a weak and unprofessional teacher. The chill in my body then becomes the problem, a defect in my own body and mind, not in the hostile student bodies and minds that caused me injury, pain, and fear. However, when students use the rhetoric of injury to complain, many administrators are likely to consider the defect, not in the students' bodies but, rather, in the body of the minoritized teacher subject of injury.

As a woman of color, it is easy to assume my body as a dangerous and hostile body toward my students in that case. As a teacher, I am assumed by both administrators and students to occupy the position of power in my class and have the capacity to effect harm rather than be harmed. As an Arab woman, I am also marked by centuries of orientalism and colonization as a strange body that's irrational, passive, risky, and terrorizing all together. As a foreigner, I am a stranger where strangers "are not simply those who are not known. . . . but those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognized as not belonging*, as being out of place." (Ahmed, 2000, p. 21, emphasis in original). Strange bodies, like mine, Ahmed (2000) points out, have particular emotions of fear stuck to them by others. By virtue of the demographic statistics that show women of color in academia are scarce, my body in the classroom is already a strange one. My strange presence in academia and the classroom makes my body perceived as hostile even before I talk or act, and Whately bodies often respond to my presence in hostile and violent ways, which is part of the rhetoric of injury.

## On How Things Might Change

When I proposed this chapter, I asked, "How could minority educators maintain themselves as expert authorities in the eyes of their students and administrators while giving students more power in the assessment process?" In reality, oftentimes, minority educators don't have the tools to maintain such a balance between such conflicting authorities. To assume that they can achieve such a balance places daunting and stressful burdens on minority educators' shoulders, causing tremendous emotional labor and physical and mental health crises. In this chapter, I haven't endeavored to show how to maintain that balance successfully, nor have I attempted to report a success story about implementing critical pedagogy and antiracist writing assessment. On the contrary, this chapter traces the process and struggle that a minority educator went through when implementing a pedagogy that the educator's colleagues, students, and administrators considered too radical or risky.

Oftentimes we're introduced to pedagogies that sound promising, we get excited, and we want to implement them. However, promoting pedagogies without accounting for the processes and politics that govern their implementation can be harmful to those who sincerely want to do their best for students. Pedagogies don't work on their own; they function within a political context and rhetorical

ecologies that grant those pedagogies success or failure. In other words, it is not that any pedagogy succeeds or fails; rather, failure or success emerges from the multitude of actors within rhetorical ecologies that include pedagogies as only one component in the education process.

Therefore, implementing radical pedagogies requires privileged educators to contribute to the rhetorical ecologies in education by doing antiracist work themselves and normalizing radical antiracist curricula in their departments. Tenured and TT educators need to be on the front line in communicating with administrators who have power over *who* implements *what* in the classroom. WPAs, especially those who believe in such radical pedagogies, need to do the hard work of advocating for these pedagogies so that minority educators don't have to do it all. After all, the violence of White supremacy culture in academia against minoritized teachers and their students echoes the street violence and police brutality against racialized bodies. My recognition of that connection compels me to maintain critical pedagogy and antiracist writing assessment in my classes. It also compelled me to take the risk of writing this chapter.

The advocacy I call for means that my White colleagues trade and sacrifice some of their privileges to support minoritized bodies in the academy. My experience would have been very different if colleagues in my department had acknowledged my lack of power as a NTT faculty of color and assigned me a mentor to reach out to me and check on my progress and well-being periodically. It would have been empowering if my friendly White colleagues had listened to me when I reached out to them and brought my concerns to the department meetings as a first step for action. It would have been empowering if the White tenured WPA had stopped the violence he witnessed in his office against me by the junior TT White administrator when she insulted me and my pedagogy. It would have been revolutionary if he accepted my offer to conduct a series of workshops about labor-based grading contracts for writing instructors in the department. But the reality was different. I was left totally alone in my department, out of place, and without a community to belong to.

## Why I Speak

Yet, I continue my journey in implementing a critical pedagogy and antiracist writing assessment. What keeps me motivated and inspired are my students and the change I could affect in the world. The classroom, to me, as it is to hooks (2004), “remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12), and the positive responses I receive from many students keep me going. On the final day of my FYW course of Spring 2021, I had a conversation with my students about two movies I assigned related to our course topics. We discussed how the films connected with our course theme about fighting the fight to promote justice. That final meeting was the best I could have hoped for in the last class session. Students engaged critically with the discussion, and the conversation

continued even after our class period ended. About ten students remained in the Zoom classroom, eager to continue the conversation about what we, as educated citizens, could do next to resist oppression.

A few days later, a student from that class, a young woman of color, met with me to discuss a few assignments. The meeting ended with her compliments about my teaching, and later she wrote to my department head asking him to retain me and telling him how she, as a student of color, needs to see more women of color teachers like me in the department. Through her action,<sup>8</sup> the student embodied all that she learned during the semester about rhetoric, writing, and contributing to social justice. In her written words, she became evidence of why we need to focus on critical literacy and radical pedagogies in our rhetoric and composition classes. That student letter will always remain a reason that compels me as a teacher to keep pushing my critical pedagogy and agendas forward in the U.S. academy.

Audre Lorde's (2017) book, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, is always alive inside me. In my case, silence is what will always hurt me. Speaking might not get me in the short-term closer to what I want. Talking about my antiracist writing assessment pedagogy at conferences, invited talks, job interviews, or publications might not get me the recognition or the opportunity that I seek. In the short term, I might lose an opportunity for a job, recognition, or promotion, which would result in me also losing an opportunity to effect change in academia. Moreover, as Whitney Lew James who is cited in the introduction of this book, reflected about the potential harm that comes about by White audiences interpreting minorities' positionalities as a performance of trauma, I reflected too. I was mostly worried about how White readers, especially in my tenure committee, might perceive my struggle in teaching and emphasis on my positionality as a minority member in a PWI. Would they think that I am a defective teacher who is looking for excuses to justify her failure? This concern didn't occur to me when thinking of BIPOC readers, as they likely go through similar experiences; thus, they are likely to relate to mine. In that sense, I encourage White readers to reflect on this to likewise interrogate the ways Whiteness and White supremacy culture suffuse themselves into the ways they interpret BIPOC struggles. Indeed, the questions and suggestions I offer throughout this chapter serve as starting points for this hard but important work.

That said, my long-term goal of resisting oppression wherever I encounter it makes it impossible for me to remain silent—because if silence is to protect my individual self, it is likely to harm others, including my students. I have, as Lorde had before me, “come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it

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8. The student, Athziry Marrufo, gave me permission to publish her letter to my department head with her full name on my personal website. You can access the letter here: <https://kefayadiab.weebly.com/a-student-letter-by-athziry.html>.

bruised or misunderstood” (2017, p. 1), where the risk of being bruised or misunderstood extends beyond the rhetoric to the rhetor.

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