

# WAC *Journal* Interview of Asao B. Inoue

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Those of us teaching in writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines (WAC/WID) are often caught between a rock and a hard place: While we see writing as a means of helping students become agentive, the forms of that writing are usually dictated by disciplinary faculty or university “standards” or the fields themselves in which status quo is rarely questioned. While writing is, indeed, a tool of discovery, it can also be a tool of oppression when the ideas of what counts as “good” writing are regulatory and prescriptive.

This tension is not only present in WAC/WID, of course, as research and theory in basic writing and first-year writing have long focused on this dilemma and the ways that writing can be both a cudgel of status quo values (read: narrow and elitist) and a challenge to those values. In WAC/WID, however, these conversations only seem to happen in the backchannels, if at all, and the status quo is rarely challenged. Further contributing to the problem is the highly visible lack of teachers and scholars of color in WAC/WID research and practice.

A prominent voice that has challenged these ideas, particularly through the lens of writing assessment, is Asao B. Inoue, Ph.D., who is a Professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences and director of university writing at the University of Tacoma. Through his award-winning publications, including the co-edited collection *Race and Writing Assessment* (Peter Lang, 2012) and the monograph *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* (Parlor 2015), and his leadership as past chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Asao Inoue guides us to the future of WAC/WID, a future in which social justice is at the forefront.

**Neal Lerner: What’s your origin story about coming to teaching writing, particularly in terms of key moments or people that had a major influence?**

Asao Inoue: I took a summer class near the end of my undergraduate degree (BA in English Literature with a minor in Writing Studies) at Oregon State University. This was in the early 90s. The course was an advanced writing class that focused on teaching writing. It was taught by Chris Anderson, who is still there. He was the Director of Composition at the time. I’d taken several other courses from him and admired him and found his style of teaching inviting. His feedback on my writing was always encouraging, and I wanted to write for a male teacher, which was rare for me up to

that point. Chris would write with us in class and read some of his writing to us. His words always sounded poetic, musing, tentative, humble. I love this about him as a teacher. In the summer class, we read and discussed composition studies articles and rhetoric as an ancient Hellenic practice of citizenship. I was introduced to the idea of pedagogy, that teaching writing was a thoughtful and planned practice, something scholars thought deeply about. While it wasn't until a bit later that I began to study rhetoric, I got some of my first lessons about rhetoric in that class by reading Berlin, Faulkerson, Faigley, Hairston, Ede (who happened to teach in our department), and Lunsford.

In fact, my first substantive and meaningful lesson that influenced me as a teacher and writer in those early years was Peter Elbow's book, *Writing Without Teachers*. During that summer, I was getting married, and I worked the graveyard shift at a gas station. I had some time on my hands. The class finished in late June, but I had all of July and August before the wedding and grad school began. I asked Chris: What can I read over the summer to prepare me for my work in grad school and as a teacher of writing? He suggested that I read Elbow's book and do the activities in it as best I could. So, during the long graveyard hours at a deserted gas station in Corvallis, I read slowly and carefully that book. I would read a section or chapter, then write oil-stained page after page, in the garage, the smell of gas and oil thick in the air, with one eye on the page and one on the pumps. That book and my writing was deeply satisfying. I can remember being eager to go to work at 9 pm so that I could get started on my reading and writing. While today for most writing teachers, perhaps, Elbow's book is too simplistic, not political enough, or simply an anachronism, I still find much in it worth sharing with my students, like chapter 4, "The Teacherless Writing Classroom." It's still one of the better places I know to help early writers read each others' drafts and find practices and confidence in those practices.

The book also planted a metaphorical seed in me as a teacher and researcher, which I've carried with me to this day. In chapter 2, "The Process of Writing—Growing," Elbow opens with a parable of sorts about a land where the people couldn't touch the floor no matter how much they tried because their process was to reach up to the sky. What I love about that parable is how in hyperbole we can see the paradigm in which people often get trapped, and this is Elbow's point about the parable. Writing teachers and students often think that the best way to write is the same old ways that haven't worked in the past for most people. Now, Elbow has his answer, which I like, but I see this parable having a much wider application. In my own work in writing assessment, I've taken (often unconsciously or subconsciously) this parable to heart. Why must we assess students writing in the ways we have? Maybe there is more to an assessment than the tool or rubric or assignment or feedback practice, maybe its an ecology? Why do teachers not think first about what, how, why, and in what ways assessment

happens in their classrooms before they think about curricula, texts, assignments, lessons? Why do we think that using standards help students to write better, maybe they are actually white supremacist, racist?

One more moment that has been important to me as a teacher. Years later, I was in a tenure-track job at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon, a year from tenure. My wife had just given birth to our second son. We were in bed. I was reading Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps*. The book was like a thunderstorm that was both frightening and exhilarating. Every page spoke to me, about me, was about me. Victor and I are similar in many ways, how we grew up, what happened, why. That book showed me a way out of my self-blame and shame of my failings in school, and my deep insecurities about myself as a writer and thinker. It was the Marxian critique, Gramsci, and Freire that Victor's book introduced me to. But I realized right then, in that bed, next to my wife, how much I still needed a good, male mentor, one who was more like me, who was a scholar-teacher of color. Chris was wonderful, and very important. He opened the door for me to see that there is this beautiful life of teaching writing to others, but he is white and from a middle-class upbringing in Spokane. Victor gave me purpose and confidence. Victor showed me how I could be, and in a multitude of ways that seemed attainable, even as he was such an academic rockstar. In that bed, I realized I had to leave my job and go back to school. It was a frightening decision, but one I could not turn away from. When I told my wife that I needed to do this, to go to WSU and work with Victor to get a PhD, it was the first time I'd cried in front of her. It could have gone wrong, but because I followed Victor, it didn't.

**Neal Lerner: What do you see as the present state of WAC/WID? What would you like WAC/WID to look like in the future?**

Asao Inoue: This is a hard question for me because I don't really consider myself a WAC/WID scholar. I've directed several WAC programs (I currently direct one), and I've read in the literature, but I don't contribute directly to it. So, what I say here is really from the perspective of an outsider who looks in, and likely is missing critical works and perspectives that I just don't know about. What I see now, is a lack of any substantive theorizing or use of theories of race and racism, intersectional or not, in how teaching or learning writing across disciplines happens or could happen. I'd like to see more of that. Vicki Tolar Burton voiced a version of this problem in her 2010 CCC review of WAC literature. More recently, Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young published a co-edited collection, *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy*, that offers a much needed set of discussions around racism in WAC contexts. Mya Poe also has done some good work in this area. I'm thinking in particular of her 2013 article in *Across the Disciplines*, "Re-Framing Race in Teaching Writing Across the

Curriculum.” But very little scholarship directly addresses the ways in which the discourses expected of nurses, business majors, engineers, and others across all fields and professions are quite simply white supremacist. It’s harsh sounding language, language that makes many uncomfortable, but it’s language needed if we want real structural changes. We gotta call it like it is. This kettle ain’t black. It’s white. White supremacist. And we gotta find ways to help our colleagues in compassionate ways to deal with this structural problem around the sole use and assessment of white language norms. I’m getting really tired of hearing colleagues in Nursing or Business or Engineering tell me, or imply, that their students must use a white standard of English if they are going to be communicative and effective in their fields or professions. That’s just bullshit. And it hurts students, Black, Latino/a, Asian, Native/Tribal, and White alike. We all lose. Our disciplines lose. I’d like to see more projects that do this larger, harder work that stretches outside of the Humanities. It’s harder than similar work in the Humanities because we in the Humanities generally have accepted the structural critique of racism and whiteness, and when we hear it applied to language standards in classrooms, we generally are sympathetic, even if we don’t always know what to do about it.

**Neal Lerner: A common critique of WAC/WID is that it doesn’t challenge the status quo, but instead merely enables status quo discursive forms, hierarchies, imbedded racism, etc. to perpetuate. Do you agree?**

Asao Inoue: Given what I’ve said about what I hope to see in WAC/WID scholarship in the future, yes, I do. When I work with faculty from across disciplines, revealing this problem is one major thing I try to accomplish. I start by explaining the way in which language can exist and work, which is among people. It travels with people. People communicate, so people make and perpetuate standards, which are deeply about those people. If this is true, then the discourses in any discipline are directly influenced by those who have used and controlled those discourses. That’s mostly white males of middle- and upper-class standing in the US. No surprises. We all know the histories of our disciplines and of the academy generally. For most of its global history, higher education and the research and discourse communities that make up those institutions have been White, Western, male, heteronormative, and Christian. This kind of *habitus* is the status quo. And because race is so taboo, few can imagine that what they do when they communicate in their fields or professions, or expect from their students, is anything but trying to communicate, honestly, ethically, and clearly. It is difficult for many to see outside of their own *habitus*, their own dispositions and embodied habits of language. What seems communicative, honest, ethical, and clear to someone trained in the discourse of nursing can be very difficult to see

as harmful and white supremacist. It's how you save lives. And this is true, but what is also true is that it harms many students of color and multilingual students. When disciplines and teachers use their idiosyncratic versions of their white disciplinary discourses as the standard by which to judge all students, they perpetuate white language supremacy. When they see their Black or Latino/a or multilingual students failing or doing poorly, they think, "ah, I just need better ways to respond to writing—I need new strategies to help students master the standard." And that is the conscientious teacher. But that response is deeply misguided because it naturalizes the standard, keeps invisible the nature of the status quo as anything but one historical group's language norms, at the expense of many others.

**Neal Lerner: Is there such a thing as an “activist” WAC/WID? If so, what might that look like?**

Asao Inoue: I wish I could say that I've given this deep and long thought. I haven't, but right now, what I think would be activist WAC/WID work would be to cultivate an antiracist and anti-white language supremacist project on two fronts simultaneously. The project's goal would be to change societal structures that shape the way we judge language and make decisions about it and from it. The first front, of course, is cultivating more discussions and curricular changes around white language supremacy in the academy, which start with changes in assessment ecologies across the disciplines. I think this is done in small ways already, but could be—maybe given the violence and problems we see in our world today—should be the main aim of all WAC/WID faculty development programs. Why help faculty maintain racist systems? Racist systems hurt people. I ain't into aiding and abetting injustice. The second front, the more difficult one (as if the first wasn't difficult), is to reach out into the community and business sectors, cultivating changes there in language judgment practices.

What makes our society's white supremacy so durable and malleable, so ever-changing, is its overdetermined nature. Structures upon structures that structure more structures. This is also the nature of our own *habitus* and why it is hard to not be white supremacist. We can change our hearts and our intentions, but that doesn't change our standards, or the dispositions we've cultivated over many years about what is clear, what is valuable, what is good or bad in language practices, or what we think our students will need in their futures because others are not as enlightened as us—the delaying of activism and social justice for the sake of our students! Can you hear how foolish and counterproductive that sounds?

So, successful activist work starts in at least these two fronts simultaneously, so that a critical mass can happen before the overdetermined nature of our language judgment systems co opt our in-the-moment tactics that are meant to prevent racism

or white supremacist outcomes. In the final chapter of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, in which she offers some ways to change the problem of Black and Brown mass incarceration in the US, which is the epitome of racism and white supremacy from top to bottom, she draws on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s later strategies for civil rights work in the country. Alexander explains that King understood that the best strategy for true structural changes in the US that would liberate everyone meant that the movement couldn't be about civil rights, but must be about broader human rights. Thomas F. Jackson makes this argument in his 2007 book, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice*. The point is, human rights was for King an intersectional and wider, even global, set of structures that overdetermined the racism and civil rights problems he started trying to tackle. It was about poverty, labor, health care, the environment. Pull the thread of how to address white language supremacy in your classroom and you find that the garment is made of many threads that stretch to other places outside the university and your discipline, many of which seemingly have nothing to do with writing well in your discipline. I think successful activist work that looks to address antiracism and white supremacy in language judgment practices must deal with, must find allies in other fields that do this work already, other problems too, showing the ways, for instance, food scarcity, poverty, the criminalization of Black and Brown men that begins at a young age, health issues and environmental issues that harm people and are attached to where some must live, are just as much about writing in the disciplines or writing across the curriculum, or writing in the professions as some idiosyncratic notion of "good writing."

**Neal Lerner: Are current movements towards inclusive teaching practices for diverse student learners at odds with teaching writing in WAC/WID contexts?**

Asao Inoue: No, I don't think so, for all the reasons I've been mentioning already. Inclusive practices for assessing writing (assessment is the engine of learning to write—that's my primary term for pedagogy, learning, not teaching), are fundamentally about the human right to language in the ways one can. As our national organization has endorsed, all people have the right to the language of their nurture. And this right should not equate to exclusion from fields of study, professions, or anything else. It may mean that we as a complex society need to work differently as listeners and readers, form new *habitus*—why should we expect everyone to language to us in ways that we language.

Perhaps one practice I have promoted over the last few years, labor-based grading contracts, which eliminates the use of a dominant white standard to determine grades in classrooms, and instead uses quantifiable labor to determine progress and

grades, could be seen as at odds with many w-courses or writing in the major courses. [NL: See Inoue, Asao B. (2005). Community-based assessment pedagogy. *Assessing Writing* 09.3, 208–38; and Inoue, Asao B. (2012). “Grading Contracts: Assessing their Effectiveness on Different Racial Formations.” In Inoue, Asao B. and Mya Poe (Eds.), *Race and Writing Assessment*; New York: Peter Lang.] Those courses often have content that needs covering, and so for many teachers, students need to be assessed on how well they know that material. A labor-based system seemingly ignores what a student has learned or displays in writing or other activities, but this is a misunderstanding. Without getting into the weeds of the kind of assessment ecology and pedagogy I’m calling for, I’ll say this about inclusive assessment practices for diverse learners in WAC/WID contexts, and we should be clear here with our euphemisms, “diverse student learners” means primarily students of color and multilingual students. All students come to school to learn and have fun, and paradoxically, these conditions contribute to another aspect of the human condition, suffering. Because of this, we should hope that our students are willing to freely reveal their weaknesses and failures to us, and we should be willing, as teachers who read their writing, to reveal our own weaknesses and failures at making meaning out of their words. If this is the way in which we learn to language, then inclusive practices should be universal in school, and they cannot be at odds with diverse learners. In fact, most conventional ways of judging students language practices, grading and assessing them, are at odds with diverse students’ language practices. This is exactly why we have WAC/WID programs, because teachers from all disciplines see and feel that their “students cannot write,” and they do not know how to teach to them or read their writing productively. The difficulty is that, like Elbow’s parable, too many teachers keep trying to reach the floor of inclusive assessment writing practices by stretching up to the sky, then complaining about how the floor cannot reach their fingertips.