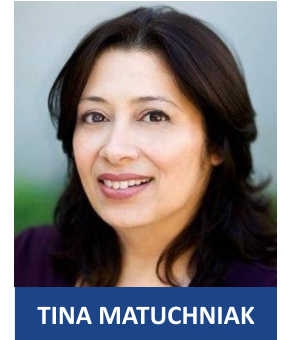


Re-making the Writing Center: A Years-Long Process of Committing to an Antiracist Agenda

Tina Matuchniak
California State University, Long Beach

Following the brutal murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, conversations about and critiques of conventional writing center pedagogy and practice necessarily became more urgent and charged. It was no longer sufficient (or even possible) to merely talk about race and the pervasiveness of racism in our institutions; it was time for action, revision. It was time to consider the role of our writing center in participating in and perpetuating injustice, or at the very least, in maintaining the status quo. And, perhaps more importantly, it was time to consider what action could be taken, right now, to build an antiracist writing center, specifically one that challenges anti-Black racism, given the current and historical racist context in the U.S. The events of 2020 brought into sharp focus the need for a campus-wide effort to acknowledge that whereas *all* racism is reprehensible, not all groups have the same lived experience of racism.



TINA MATUCHNIAK

Take the case of a commonly-cited example—routine law enforcement engagement with the public. According to a report published by the Public Policy Institute of California, there are great disparities in traffic stops by law enforcement across racial groups. Black Californians, for example, are more than twice as likely to be searched as white Californians (20% vs. 8%). Furthermore, the report noted that Black Californians were targeted disproportionately to their population in the state. For example, Black residents make up 7% of the state’s population, but they account for 16% of stops by law enforcement. The study also noted differences in stop experience across the races. Asians and Latinos, they found, were less likely to be searched after a traffic stop compared to Blacks (Loftstrum et al.). These findings, together with the unforgettable image of Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd’s neck, make it clear that anti-Black racism is both qualitatively and quantitatively different from racism writ large. It is, as Kihana Miraya Ross puts it, “more than just ‘racism against black people’ . . . It’s a theoretical framework that illuminates society’s inability to recognize . . . [Black people’s] humanity.” Within this context, therefore, it is incumbent upon us as writing center professionals to re-make our writing centers as antiracist spaces with the understanding that racism operates differently and uniquely across racial and ethnic groups.

College writing centers in the U.S. have sometimes been conceived of as politically neutral student support services whose central mission is to “help” students to write. Such centers, it is assumed, have democratizing effects, as they level the playing field for those who are disadvantaged in some way, be it through their race/ethnicity, primary language, or immigration status. Drawing on postcolonial theory, Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski reject this construct of an uncritical, acculturationist writing center, where students are assimilated into the (academic) discourse of privilege. They propose, instead, a model of the writing center as a contact zone

where “marginalized students become aware of how and why academic discourses situate them within certain power relationships and require of them particular subject positions” (44). Such a radical writing center necessarily challenges conventional theories and practices, especially those situated within an orthodoxy steeped in ideologies of individualism, colorblindness, and linguistic neutrality. Wonderful Faison, Romeo Garcia, and Anna K. Trevino have, further, critiqued the writing center mission to “help” students as one that assumes the superiority of the white rhetorical tradition and, correspondingly, relies on “white benevolence,” an arguably racist stance (83). They propose, instead, an approach that values “collaborative benevolence” where everyone needs and benefits from assistance (92).

Based on these critiques, it could be argued that the success of any writing center’s mission rests squarely in the hands of the tutors who staff it as well as its leadership. Whom we hire as tutors, how we prepare them to do their work in a culture of equity and inclusion, and how we all develop personally and professionally to become agents of change is central to forwarding an antiracist agenda in the writing center. Thus, I made it a priority to re-make our writing center with an expressed and actionable goal of recruiting and preparing a staff of diverse peer tutors who, themselves, are ready and willing to challenge racist, specifically anti-Black racist, practices.

Our writing center is housed in the Student Success Center of a Hispanic-serving, four-year institution with a largely non-white student body, approximately 55% of whom come from minoritized groups.¹ It is open to all matriculated students, undergraduate and graduate, across all disciplines. We offer one-to-one tutoring (both in-person and via Zoom), course-embedded tutoring, and workshops. Our staff is comprised of one part-time faculty director (me—Indian), one full-time staff person (Latinx), and 20-30 peer tutors, most of whom also identify as non-white (in 2020, 36.36% Latinx; 25.72% Asian; 4.55% Black). These tutors have either completed (or are co-enrolled in) a three-unit rhetoric and composition course focused on the theories and practices of writing instruction, a course that grounds our writing center praxis. Additionally, tutors receive thirty-six hours of pre-service and in-service training over the course of a year. This article, then, will describe our writing center’s effort to re-make itself taking a three-pronged approach: Consciousness-raising to prepare ourselves to do the work of an antiracist agenda, revising our tutor education to center antiracist literature in the writing center, and refining our tutor recruitment practices to reach and recruit more Black peer tutors in alignment with our efforts to challenge anti-Black racism and advance Black student success.

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND SELF-WORK

Before we started, I realized that I would have to do some self-work; I had to turn inward and take stock of my own understanding of and positionality in the racist structures at my institution. As an immigrant from India (a racially homogeneous but ethnically, culturally, religiously, and linguistically diverse country), my understanding of race and racism in the United States was limited and filtered through a white lens. Furthermore, I live in an urban, progressive part of the country, where I am sheltered from overt acts of racism and shielded from microaggressions as a result of my light-skinned privilege. Reflecting on my own positionality was an important step toward facilitating a culture of thoughtful and deliberate antiracism in our writing center.

Soon after the brutal murders of Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd in the summer of 2020, I checked in with my staff to see how they were doing. Several expressed the need to talk about what had just occurred, so we assembled online to share in a way that was both cathartic and productive. As a group, we decided to channel our discussions by reading two books that were getting a lot of buzz

at the time: *White Fragility* by Robin D'Angelo and *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. These readings provided us with a lens and a language with which to examine the events that had just occurred. We read one book in July and the other in August and talked about the issues and themes contained therein. Reading these texts helped us to both enter the ongoing conversations regarding racism as well as understand our own unique positions in a racist society. We asked ourselves the following questions: Who am I? What positions (of privilege or otherwise) do I occupy? What in these texts resonated with me? What made me uncomfortable? What do I know now (about racism and about myself) that I did not know before reading these texts?

At the end of the summer, I distributed an IRB-approved survey to nine participants asking them to describe their experiences in the book club. Tutors expressed a variety of motivations for joining the book club, from wanting to learn/deepen their understanding of racism, to wanting to participate in the “racial reckoning” of the Black Lives Matter movement, to wanting to develop their own professional identities as emerging educators who cared deeply about the lived experiences of their students. They also said that the experience influenced their practice in a variety of ways, from an increased sensitivity to racial issues, to reflecting on their own implicit biases regarding race, to understanding the hegemonic impact of “standard” notions of writing and the accompanying erasure of the self. As much as any other institution, inside or outside of higher education, we were contributing to the reproduction of the status quo, and we had to acknowledge that, examine it with a critical eye, and start to talk about it openly and honestly. How did racism play out at the university? What writing center practices contributed (overtly and covertly) to the maintenance of the status quo? And what were we going to do about the underrepresentation of race/ethnicity groups in positions of power? This preliminary work paved the way for me to think more deeply about how to construct a tutor education curriculum that actively and intentionally engaged in an antiracist pedagogy.

The self-work that began with the antiracist book club continued through the fall of that same year. First, using freewriting, twenty tutors (including four tutors from the summer book club) unpacked what came up for them when they heard words such as “racism” and “privilege” and “antiracist.” Then, students put their responses into a word cloud to see common themes. Next, they discussed their reactions to some of the terms and the emotional impact they had on them, personally and professionally. Finally, they filled out a social identity profile (Davis) and discussed the following questions:

Given what you’ve learned about yourself . . .

- How might your experiences with higher education differ from your tutees’ experiences?
- How do your experiences with higher education influence your expectations and interactions with tutees?

Asking tutors to see themselves not only as a composite of multiple and intersectional identity markers but also in relation to equally complex others (their students) helped them to constitute their work in the writing center as complicated (not straightforward) and critical (not neutral). Some, for example, saw themselves in their students’ experiences. They could identify with the disorientation and alienation that comes from being a member of a marginalized group, be it Black, Latinx, first-generation college students, immigrants, or, as in the case of many, identifying with multiple identity groups. Others noted a disconnect, in as much as their lived experiences aligned with some of their students’ experiences but not all. Virtually all of them expressed that their own experiences in higher education influenced their expectations and practice in the

writing center. In this way, tutors came to identify their positionality in the tutor-student relationship and understand the impact such positionality might have on their practice.

TUTOR EDUCATION

Following the year of self-work, we undertook a more formal course of antiracist preparation. To our usual course texts (Mackiewicz and Babcock; Murphy and Sherwood), I added several critical texts that addressed racism and antiracist practices more broadly, including *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication* (Condon and Young), *Radical Writing Center Praxis* (Greenfield), and *Tutoring Second Language Writers* (Bruce and Rafoth). I supplemented these with handbooks that dealt with the practical nuts and bolts matters of the tutoring process. In this way, I foregrounded the conversation around racial diversity and equity while still providing tutors with the practical knowledge they would need as practicing tutors.

At the end of the semester, surveys distributed to the twelve newly-hired tutors who took the course indicated that they were affected both personally and professionally as a result of reading these texts. On a professional level, they spoke of how reading these texts fostered a critical consciousness about race and racism. One tutor, Jack, wrote

“Addressing Racial Diversity” (Barron and Grimm) was helpful because it provided real conversation between scholars of the process of transforming a writing center into a more racially-conscious space It emphasized the importance of changing the consciousness of individuals to benefit the collective in [a] way that did not sugarcoat the sometimes difficult part of deconstructing individual's status-quo worldviews . . . and help such individuals recognize the personal and collective benefits of the need for cultural change.

Several talked about the writing center as a space for transformation. One, Aliya, noted that the “ties between language and identity mean that writing centers cannot be neutral spaces and, therefore, must serve as antiracist spaces.” This connection between language and identity being material to writing and learning was echoed by Jack, who said the texts and discussions around them helped him to “deconstruct notions of academic language that [they had] passively accepted as ‘correct.’” Similarly, these training components helped Daniel to recognize how Standard Written American English and “the standardization of American schooling work[ed] to silence POC and minority groups.” This silence, this erasure, serves to shape the stories people (students, tutors) tell about themselves in academic spaces. And as Jack noted, “When people's individual stories are silenced, brushed aside, or otherwise invalidated, these individuals are forced to shape their identities around narratives that have been validated by status-quo gatekeepers, mostly at the expense of [their] cultural identity.”

TUTOR RECRUITMENT

My first call to action, based on reading antiracist literature, was to revise and expand our recruitment practices such that we were not only *including* Black students in our search, but proactively *reaching out* to them to apply for the position. By expanding and diversifying the applicant pool, we felt confident that we would find highly qualified Black tutors to staff our center. Our rationale for such a targeted approach to recruitment is that greater representation is vital to resisting the structural factors that support and contribute to anti-Black racism through a process of mutual understanding, mutual respect, and dialogue amongst the staff. Furthermore, the more Black tutors we employ, the more opportunities we have to foster a community of care in which Black students have access to peers and shared cultural values, which, as we know, can be crucial to their success. To that end, we took a two-pronged approach to recruitment: Revising

the language of the job description to include language that explicitly advanced an antiracist agenda and expanding our recruitment efforts in order to reach more Black applicants.

The first revision we made to our job description was to explicitly affirm our commitment to an inclusive, antiracist agenda by moving our diversity statement to the very top of the list of qualifications, which now reads: “Minimum Qualifications: Commitment to an antiracist, inclusive agenda and/or expertise in working successfully with a diverse student population.” Next, we moved the GPA requirement to the bottom of the list of minimum requirements, indicating that it was the least important of our minimum requirements. Third, we removed any language about English grammar because we had already said “strong writing skills,” and we did not want to promote Standard American English as being dominant over all other Englishes and languages. Finally, under the Preferred/Desired qualifications, we added a preference for proficiency in Spanish. As a Hispanic-serving institution, we thought it important to recruit more Spanish-speaking tutors so that students could choose their preferred language in which to communicate during the sessions.

In addition to revising our job description, we also expanded our recruitment efforts to include conventional channels such as flyers and career center posting, as well as targeted recruitment and outreach to student organizations such as the Black Student Union and La Raza. I went to each of these organization’s meetings and spoke to the students there about our commitment to recruiting a more diverse tutor body and encouraged them to apply. I also told them that I was happy to mentor them through the application process. Third, I reached out to the department chairs of the Ethnic Studies Departments (Africana Studies, Chicano/Latino Studies, American Indian Studies, and Asian American Studies) to distribute and post the position in their respective departments. Finally, I reached out to my own faculty network, formally via email but also informally at meetings or chats over coffee, to help me spread the word about recruitment to students who might be good candidates for the position.

The results of these recruitment efforts were mixed. Whereas our writing center had previously had a decent record of recruiting a majority of non-white tutors, we didn’t meet our target of hiring a tutor cohort that more closely represented the population of students that visit our writing center. We had far fewer Black students (compared to Latinx, Asian, and white) students applying to be tutors, and as a result we hired fewer Black tutors, which resulted in a final first-time tutor cohort of 3.14% Black tutors, compared to an overall campus population of 3.7% Black students. At first glance this seems fair, but when considering that the proportion of Black students who *use* the writing center is 5.73%, it is evident that our tutor cohort is not as representative of the population we serve. Clearly, we need to do a better job of attracting Black students to apply to be tutors in order to meet our objective of creating a community of care in which Black students feel affirmed and empowered to succeed.

WINS, LOSSES, LEARNINGS

The work of remaking the writing center is a process, a project, a commitment. It is ongoing at our center as it is at our institution. The consciousness-raising continues as each year passes and as each new cohort of tutors takes its place in the writing center. We continue to add to and refine our tutor education curriculum and continue to have formal and informal conversations about race, racism, and the writing center. On the plus side, we have accumulated a robust set of literature to inform our work and have acquired a new language with which to talk about race and racism in the writing center. We understand that the work is never finished, that it is provisional and subject to revision, that it requires us to work in collaboration with each other,

but also with partners across the campus. On the minus side, we did not see the outcomes we had hoped for. Our recruitment efforts did not attract substantively more Black applicants. We need to do more effective outreach, the kind that demonstrates our commitment to an antiracist agenda writ large. We need to build more trust, and through that trust, more partnerships with students and organizations across the campus. And finally, perhaps the biggest lesson has been in the area of *how* we approached this work. What started as a reactive, ad hoc process undoubtedly provided invaluable momentum and motivation, but the work of remaking the writing center calls for a more intentional, proactive stance to an antiracist agenda, one that takes an ecological approach, wherein intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy factors are considered together in order to facilitate healthy, successful outcomes for all.

NOTES

1. I use the term “minoritized” here to indicate groups who have been historically disadvantaged (e.g. Cambodians) versus groups who are fewer in number (minority) but who may nevertheless not be disadvantaged (e.g. Japanese).

WORKS CITED

- Barron, Nancy, and Nancy Grimm. “Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center: Stories and Lessons from Two Beginners.” *The St. Martin Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*. 4th ed., edited by Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood, Bedford/St. Martins, 2011, pp. 302-25.
- Bawarshi, Anis, and Stephanie Pelkowski. "Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1999, pp. 41-58.
- Bruce, Shanti, and Ben Rafoth, editors. *Tutoring Second Language Writers*. Utah State UP, 2016.
- Condon, Frankie, and Vershawn Ashanti Young, editors. *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*. WAC Clearinghouse, 2016.
- Davis, Shametrice. *Equity in the Classroom I: Engaging in Self-Work for a Deeper Understanding of Inequity*. Faculty Center Professional Development Workshop. CSU Long Beach, Long Beach, CA, 2020.
- DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. Beacon P, 2018.
- Faison, Wonderful, et al. “White Benevolence: Why Supa-Save-a-Savage Rhetoric Ain’t Getting It.” *Counterstories from the Writing Center*, edited by Frankie Condon and Wonderful Faison, UP of Colorado, 2022, pp. 81-94.
- Greenfield, Laura. *Radical Writing Center Praxis: A Paradigm for Ethical Political Engagement*. UP of Colorado, 2019.
- Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. One World, 2023.
- Lofstrom, Magnus, et al. *Racial Disparities in Law Enforcement Stops*. Public Policy Institute of California, 2021.
- Mackiewicz, Jo, and Rebecca Babcock, editors. *Theories and Methods of Writing Center Studies: A Practical Guide*. Routledge, 2019.
- Murphy, Christina, and Steve Sherwood. *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*. 3rd ed., edited by Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood, Bedford/St. Martins,, 2007.
- Ross, Kihana Miraya. "Call It What It Is: Anti-Blackness." *The New York Times*, 4 June 2020. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/george-floyd-anti-blackness.html>.
- Ryan, Leigh, and Lisa Zimmerelli. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. 6th ed. Bedford/St. Martins, 2016.