# Navigating Conversational Turns: Grounding Difficult Discussions on Racism

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## Avoiding evasions when discussing race in the writing center

This issue of *Praxis* focuses our attentions and intentions on "diversity in the writing center." This focus seems inherently "good": diversity is something everyone can, and should, support. We find, however, that this diversity work gets really exciting, unnerving, and potentially frustrating—but still good—when we think about how differences are more than just differences: they become unfair organizers of our lives, providing some of us with fewer opportunities, less insider knowledge, and limited access. Other articles in this issue take up gender, language, culture, physical ability, and learning style. In our piece, we invite you to consider how race intersects with these other differences, influencing "deeply embedded logics and patterns" of everyday writing center practice (Geller et al., 87). We also want you to consider with us what makes conversations about racism difficult and what we might do to sustain open, honest, and still difficult conversations with an aim toward dismantling the systematic racism that shapes our lives.

**[C]onversations that start out as explicitly about racism often turn into conversations focused on language differences. This pattern of evasion [...] detracts from efforts to identify and work against systematic racism.**

While the three of us currently work at predominantly white institutions in the Midwest, we see and recognize individual acts of racism on college campuses across institutional types and across the United States. These instances happen in writing centers, such as when a tutor of color is mistaken as a client rather than colleague, this same tutor is believed to work well with African-American writers as she can understand "their dialect," or a Latina tutor is believed to speak Spanish when she speaks only English. Systematic racism can be more difficult to identify because by definition it gives foundation to the systems and institutions that organize our lives, that we often take for granted as "normal." What does it mean that so many writing center directors are white? How do we explain that in a town with two colleges the state institution can afford a writing center, while the tribal college cannot? And why do many conversations about these issues get diverted and silenced?

While struggling against racism is everyone's responsibility, we see that writing center staff—tutors and directors alike—have a special and important role to play in antiracism. Not only do we help writers understand the socially embedded nature of literacies, which gives us a unique perspective into the notion of constructed inequity, but we also work closely and collaboratively with writers across the curriculum, which gives us insight into and influence on the future of disciplines themselves. Often institutionally located "in between" (Sunstein), writing centers are positioned to influence campus climate and to collaborate with students, instructors, and staff members in reimagining writing and literacy as well as power and privilege. Writing centers are places where different dialogues meet, where we challenge our own assumptions, and where we

ultimately work to change them. By conditioning ourselves to talk about racism, we will be able to ask difficult questions and pursue conversations with students who come into the center, which in turn can influence the work students do across campus, in courses, and within disciplines. Those of us who work in writing centers are not only individual agents with the social responsibility to address racism, but also members of larger institutions empowered to raise difficult questions, to rethink our daily practices, and to effect change on our campuses and surrounding communities.

We believe, therefore, that antiracism is not only worth our time and attention but also a process of internal and external transformation—of looking critically within the writing center at the same time as looking outward to the campus and community. Critical reflection often begins during staff meetings, colloquia, and conferences; however, there can be setbacks in these dialogues. What we have observed in professional development with predominantly white writing center members is that conversations that start out as explicitly about racism often turn into conversations focused on language differences. This pattern of evasion worries us, as it detracts from efforts to identify and work against systematic racism and leads to suggestions for changing individual writers, rather than institutions. By focusing on language differences, and by implication language change, we push aside analysis of systems and instead put the onus on individual students who are often most disadvantaged by those systems. To address this troublesome conversational turn, we first describe the pattern we have observed and then propose strategies for grounding conversations, strategies we have identified in the literature on teaching and organizing for social change.

## A Pattern of Evasion

**When those of us who work in writing centers veer away from talk about racism, we reinforce the common tropes of "color blindness" and "cultural diversity" by default.**

This pattern of evasion, as we have observed and to which we have sometimes contributed, involves a shift in conversation from an explicit focus on racism to a general focus on language differences independent of race. Those involved discuss tutorials in binary terms of native versus non-native English speakers, but give little attention to the ways that race shapes tutors' interactions with writers, including both tutors and writers who are international students. Rather than explore white privilege, participants talk about their language privilege and propose ways for working more effectively with non-native speakers of English, assuming most often that these writers are unaffected by their race in the United States.[1] This pattern is itself a form of systematic, silent racism that impedes antiracist work. The following anecdotes illustrate manifestations of the pattern, as we have observed them in both face-to-face and online forums:

- During a workshop at a professional conference, facilitators ask participants to identify ways they benefit from white privilege in an exercise modeled after Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." One person instead identifies her language privilege as a native English speaker, and other participants (primarily writing center directors) extend the conversation about language, asking for strategies in working with international students and

whether universities do a disservice to students who are accepted without "adequate" language knowledge. The facilitators make several moves to bring the conversation back to race privilege, but participants continue to ask about English-language teaching. Although several participants indicate that the international students they describe are people of color (primarily Asian), they never discuss the racism facing these students, nor consider their own participation in white privilege.

- During ongoing staff education meetings, tutors participate in one of two discussions of white privilege. One group distinguishes individual acts of racism from systematic racism, which they see as more subtle, but with more wide-reaching effects. Members of the group agree that, as white people, they each enjoy privileges because of skin color; they brainstorm ways to work against this system in the present and future. The second group's conversation is very different: within a few conversational turns, the topic shifts to language difference, which seems a natural progression to nearly all of the tutors. One tutor mentions that it is difficult to be different from the norm and provides the example of international students. The conversation focuses on language barriers facing second-language learners.
- On a graduate student listserv, a writing instructor of color identifies racism he has experienced on campus. His email is personal at the same time as attempting to open a pedagogical and professional conversation about systematic racism. Email respondents write that discussions of race privilege should be paired with consideration of gender, sexuality, and especially language. They consider the challenges facing international students, suggesting strategies for better serving people in the department who are stereotyped by language difference, and they divert the original concern about racism.

As illustrated in these cases, what we see are not loud objections to talk about racism, but more subtle shifts in conversation that could result from varied motivations: from denial or defensiveness (Barron and Grimm), from the taboos surrounding race as a topic of discussion (Tatum; Villanueva), or from a sense that our identities are layered and that a focus on race ignores other oppression hierarchies (Frye). Whatever the reason, discussions such as those described above tend to focus on inequities based on language differences and, by extension, citizenship—but ignore the systematic racism that underlies and complicates such inequalities, especially in a US context. Perhaps by focusing on language privilege, tutors and directors feel that they are addressing white privilege, since language, citizenship, and race are linked within understandings of "new racism." As Victor Villanueva explains, in recent years our rhetoric has emphasized identity politics: multiple religions, cultures, ethnicities, and languages (all plurals and broadly conceived). Movements for multiculturalism have promoted a celebration of difference that fails to account for power and privilege. Rather than work against systematic racism, the language of tolerance and diversity presents a value-neutral version of groups getting along. This language shapes the ways we understand oppression, and current rhetoric (tropes from color blindness to plural identities) silences talk about racism.

**[D]isrupting a system that is engrained in each of us involves discomfort and requires practice.**

When those of us who work in writing centers veer away from talk about racism, we reinforce the common tropes of "color blindness" and "cultural diversity" by default. Talk about language differences and learning, while acknowledging differences and political implications of writing center work, also puts those who are "other" in a position of becoming more like the "us" (with the "us" narrowly defined by language and citizenship as well as race). If we focus on racism in a sustained way, then we have to imagine systematic and institutional change rather than individual language change. We must redefine notions of "us" and the structures that maintain inequity. We believe that this talk matters because it shapes our interactions with each other as well as individual writers in conferences.[2]

## Starting Points for Disrupting the Pattern

We see an immediate challenge to our work in writing centers as disrupting the patterns of conversation that elide race for language privilege. As we hold discussions of racism in staff meetings, colloquia, workshops, tutor education courses, and other writing center gatherings, we seek strategies for grounding these conversations and working toward concrete actions that extend the talk. While many teachers note the importance of safe spaces and ground rules for facilitating conversations about race (see, for example, Tatum and Fox), our experiences indicate that these factors are important, but not enough. We feel that we are better able to sustain difficult conversations when the talk is grounded by tangible artifacts, visual representations, storytelling, or research experiences. Through consideration of particular cases or examples, as well as humor and meta-narratives, we are better able to think critically about systematic racism and, we hope, to move beyond talk to problem-solving and concrete efforts toward institutional change. Further, participating in the processes of gathering stories, analyzing representations, and researching our everyday lives can lead to crystallization, awareness through multiple ways of knowing. We believe that the following tactics,[3] which could be used in many workplaces, offer potential for keeping conversations in the writing center focused on racism. While we propose them as useful in formal settings from staff meetings to workshops, we know from experience that "practicing" open conversations in these formal settings prepares us to seize other opportunities in less planned, everyday situations as well.

- **Examine popular culture**. Artifacts (photographs, comics, news clippings, or films) can anchor conversations by situating readings and theory within "real world" contexts. Representations in popular culture (for example, episodes from *The Daily Show*, *Scrubs*, or *Futurama*) call attention to systematic racism in humorous and accessible ways.
- **Look at local artifacts**. Our local writing center publications and campus promotional materials (from recruitment flyers and student handbooks to websites and even songs) represent race, particularly when defining community membership.

- **Review visual representations**. Review of news images, magazine covers, websites, advertisements, greeting cards, picture books, and other visual rhetoric may literally illustrate systematic racism in a way that words cannot.
- **Tell personal stories**. What stories do you have to tell about the role of race in your life? Eliciting and sharing personal narratives can bring the topic close to home and help people involved in the conversation identify systematic racism in intimate and immediate terms.
- **Interview others**. To put one's stories and life history in relation to others', participants might interview other writers about their experiences with race.
- **Become ethnographers**. Ethnographic or observational researchers strive to make the familiar strange. Field research can help us to move stories beyond individual experiences and to identify how race shapes and organizes our everyday lives.
- **Record conferences**. Video or audiotapes of tutorials can help us step back to see how race consciously and unconsciously shapes our one-on-one interactions with others.
- **Reflect, and reflect again**. Meta-narratives and meta-talk provide the means to identify conversational turns, to unpack assumptions, and to name tensions. Turn to the topic in future staff meetings; take the conversation onto a staff wiki, blog, or journal; or find other ways to continue talking through this difficult topic openly and honestly.

Remembering that the "workshop is not the work" (or that activism must involve more than talk), we also believe that conversations should continue beyond staff meetings and be carried into partnerships with allies across campus. It is important to remember that disrupting a system that is engrained in each of us involves discomfort and requires practice. Consciously and deliberately pursuing change may seem difficult at first, but with sustained practice, will become routine. To continue the work of antiracism, we encourage you to find allies in your local center, your regional writing centers organization, and in the International Writing Centers Association. If you are not sure who are allies on your campus, start by seeking your Office of Multicultural or Diversity Affairs. Both the Midwest Writing Centers Association (MWCA) and the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) have special interest groups on antiracist activism, and there is discussion listserv at http://www.writing.ku.edu/WCActivism/. (Just click to join.) We recognize we have much to learn about engaging in the difficult discussions we see necessary for enacting meaningful change. We want to work together to sustain conversations that recognize not only difference and diversity but also power and privilege. Working together, we can begin to dismantle systematic racism. After all, as Geller et al. remind us: "When we make the choice to notice, mourn, and struggle against racism in our individual and professional lives, we are not alone" (87).

## Notes

[1]The discussions we have participated in have focused on experiences of racism within the United States, so assumptions about language difference are also within an American context.

[2]While our current research is focused on conversations among staff members (tutors, directors, and other writing center professionals), we are equally interested in conversations within one-on-one conferences and would be excited to see research into conferencing itself.

[3]Paula Mathieu in Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition (2005) distinguishes between tactics and strategies. Drawing on Michel de Certeau, she describes "strategies as calculated action that emanate from and depend upon 'proper' (as in propertied) spaces," whereas "to act tactically means to 'take advantage of opportunities and depend upon them'" (16). We see these starting points as tactics, to be used when opportunities arise, within the larger strategies of analysis, storytelling, and researching for more critical conversations on race and racism.

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