Embodying Antiracist Pedagogy: Why Is It So Difficult?

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"White comfort maintains the racial status quo,
so discomfort is necessary and important."
Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (141)

Black Lives Action Coalition, or BLAC, was formed at a mid-size midwestern university in spring 2016 after racist graffiti appeared on a prominent concrete block abutment west of the student center. An image of a lynching was among the racist comments, and this led to a protest of about thirty white and black students in the student center under the aegis of Black Lives Matter. A few students who were still at the center at the end of the protest received racist threats from students walking by. In addition, local social media had erupted with ugly racist comments. In response, a few of the protesters organized the Black Lives Action Coalition (BLAC), and requested that the university create a university-wide required course in what they called "Cultural Competencies." BLAC wanted the predominantly white student population to be educated, and they hoped that a course dedicated to addressing racism could help. Faculty and administrators were sympathetic, but they cautioned that a dedicated course was not realistic in the short term. Instead, representatives of BLAC worked with the Director of Composition (DOC) to establish an antiracist approach to the first-year writing program, where cultural competence was framed as a course outcome goal along with the WPA course outcome goals.

During Fall 2016, Authors 1 and 2 set up a pilot study called "Cultural Competencies in First Year Writing."[1] We decided that

having data to support the efficacy of a curricular shift would allow us to make a stronger case to university upper administration for the urgency and impact of a university-wide cultural competencies requirement. In partnership with BLAC, we designed an antiracist curriculum with five Graduate Teaching Associates who volunteered to teach experimental pilot classes in Spring 2017.[2] Five additional teaching associates taught control classes without a cultural competencies focus. Among the experimental classes, the research team employed a mixed methods approach and collected the following data: Pre/Post-Test Questionnaires, three sets of semi-structured interviews per class, minor writing tasks including free-writing, and one major writing task—a Rogerian Synthesis essay.

The DOC, graduate instructors, and members of the research team were initially unfamiliar with the term cultural competence, but members of BLAC presented the concept through the principles outlined by Georgetown University's *National Center for Cultural Competence* (NCCC), a component of the Georgetown University *Center for Child and Human Development*. Building on clinical practices for mental health professionals (Cross et. al.), the cultural competence framework involves committing to organizational practices to ensure that healthcare providers deliver culturally and linguistically responsive and sensitive care to diverse populations. According to NCCC, culturally competent organizations

- have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally;
- have the capacity to (1) value diversity, (2) conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics of difference, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge and (5) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve; and
- incorporate the above in all aspects of policy making, administration, practice, service delivery and systematically

involve consumers, key stakeholders and communities.

These principles easily fit the context of the curriculum for a first-year writing program, especially in their attention to self-assessment and growth, practices that we want students to understand as essential to critical thinking and writing practices across contexts. The addition of linguistic competence that prioritizes access and accommodates different levels of literacy further mirrors values of writing education. We added the following cultural competencies to our standard WPA outcomes:[3]

- Recognize presuppositions and consider how they shape what we perceive as "reality."
- Recognize that beliefs and arguments are framed by specific cultural contexts.
- Communicate with diverse audiences through recognizing that genres and conventions are specific to communities.
- Think critically about our position in society and how our values and assumptions influence our relationship with power through awareness, empathy, and responsibility.
- Reflect on how privilege impacts ourselves and others, while exploring options that seek to balance the playing field.

While these outcomes were envisioned within the framework of the cultural competence continuum, there is substantial overlap with essential composition goals of helping students develop awareness of the different layers of rhetorical situations, the situated nature of language, experience, and ideology, and the needs of different audiences. These goals also align with the goals of racial literacy education—where racial literacy is a set of skills, whereby students "are able to discuss the implications of race and American racism in constructive ways" (Sealey-Ruiz 386).[4] In other words, to be racially literate is to cultivate and routinely exercise the capacity to analyze how race and racism shapes everyday life through critical self-reflection, research, and conversation. The maneuvers that are

necessary toward being a rhetorical writer and critical thinker are the same needed toward cultivating racial literacy, and so the goals of writing education and diversity education frameworks like racial literacy can be neatly blended in composition classrooms.

The need to develop curricula based on cultural competencies principles is affirmed by Genevieve Garcia de Mueller and Iris Ruiz' 2017 article "Race, Silence, and Writing Program Administration." They interviewed WPAs to determine the attention to race in writing programs across the U.S. and found it lacking. They note that "When it comes to the consideration of race and writing program administration, . . . scholars of color often work in isolation recognizing that programs lack effective strategies to systematically implement race-based pedagogy. . ." (19). Many white participants in their study who felt that the needs of students of color should be addressed more adequately wanted to be more educated about the issues and felt that the responsibility for addressing those needs should lie with faculty of color (32).

In line with the reluctance to engage in issues of race documented by Garcia de Mueller and Ruiz, it became clear in our study that nearly everyone who taught this course felt uneasy about their roles. In sharing our reflections, we discovered that Author 2 felt discomfort as a person of color teaching antiracist readings because of an assumption that his white students would see him as biased and a fear that they might secretly hold racist sentiment. Author 3 felt discomfort as a white woman because of her white male students' reactions to her gender. And author 4 felt discomfort as a white man because of an assumption that he lacked expertise.

What we realized is that teachers' perceptions of their own embodied identities can get in the way of teaching antiracism. Those of us who are revising curricula to respond to the public outcry about racism in this country should be prepared to confront the issue of discomfort directly and help teachers work through it so that it doesn't undermine teachers' abilities to persevere in the face of racial stress, or what antiracist educator and activist Robin DiAngelo calls "racial disequilibrium" (*White Fragility* 103). This is

the paralysis most of us feel when we're asked to talk about race in a mixed race situation. White people are so unaccustomed to racial stress that we find it difficult to tolerate. When our racial equilibrium is disrupted, we run from that feeling because it threatens our identities as good people. We can, however, develop a thicker skin, and as teachers we must, as the racial demographics shift and our responsibility to prepare our students for the future increases. We argue that teachers should not let their emotional discomfort or perceived lack of expertise stop them from teaching about racial awareness in a writing classroom.

The Curriculum

The course was designed to address the English Department's First-Year Composition goals of entering conversations and communities of writers, analyzing and using genres, reflecting on writing technologies, practicing processes and reflection, and exploring identity. Additionally, the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition was factored into the development of the course throughout each unit to meet the larger goals of the course of the general education curriculum at a mid-size midwestern university.

The primary textbook was Rosenwasser and Stevens' *Writing Analytically*. The WPA staff had chosen this book because of its focus on analysis, rather than argument. Students learned to suspend their own judgment about issues while carefully reading texts. Supplementary readings for the course included work from authors across different configurations of identity and lived experiences, such as Geneva Smitherman, Victor Villanueva, Alicia Garza, and Gloria Anzaldua. Two of the pilot sections also used Ta Nehesi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. Students watched documentaries such as Ava DuVernay's *13th* (about mass incarceration framed within the 13th amendment) and Tim Wise's *White Like Me* (exploring the many layers of white privilege). The readings and other texts were selected to challenge students' worldviews and expose them to perspectives that they might not otherwise encounter. We wanted students to

engage with and reflect on human differences, while learning to negotiate these differences in relation to their own identities and beliefs both on the page and in regular classroom discussion.

Unit 1 focused on visual rhetorical analysis, asking students to carefully examine the details and patterns of a visual image to determine what argument the visual image is making and how. The second unit asked students to undergo the same analytical process with a short print text.[5] Unit 3 offered students an exploration of the research process and the use of evidence. In the fourth unit students employed Rogerian argumentation to present and then synthesize three stakeholder perspectives of an issue and then mediate among the perspectives. Specifically, students addressed three different perspectives on an issue, for instance, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, All Lives Matter—respectively—so that arguments supporting each stance are understood. Then the strengths and weaknesses of the stances are presented in a synthesis, followed by a conclusion that attempts to resolve differences among the stances, or alternatively, demonstrate them to be incommensurable.

The five TAs and three research assistants (including members of BLAC) met weekly to converse about the classes and to plan data collection.[6] The graduate instructors recognized the importance of conversation in these classes, especially with the goal of enhancing students' abilities to negotiate emotional conversations with each other about race and difference. Jennifer Seibel Trainor, whose ethnographic work considers the rhetorical layers of race, argues that among the reasons the norms of race are so persuasive for white students is that they operate metaphorically, bridging unrelated domains of political belief and emotion (141). In other words, students achieve a stable sense of self, deeply rooted in emotion around political ideologies framing their world views. And unpacking this intersection through conversation is an essential maneuver for students to challenge what they've internalized as (T)ruth.

The instructors understood that simply getting students to read and write about subjects of identity would not be enough to meet

the cultural competencies goals, and that open dialogue would be essential toward supporting students' rhetorical awareness across communication contexts. They drew from well-known practices in the field of rhetoric and composition toward effective cross-cultural communication, including an invitational rhetoric that prioritizes openness and rhetorical relationships built on understanding over persuasion (Foss and Griffin 5), rhetorical listening practices (Ratcliffe 17), Peter Elbow's "Believing Game" applied toward people's lived experiences, intercultural rhetorical approaches grounded in inquiry (Flower 40), and diversity training dialogues modeled in Lee Mun Wah's documentary *The Color of Fear*.

To promote conversations about race in their classrooms, the teachers in the project had to reckon with their own anxieties, to interrogate their own fears and insecurities. In the next section three teachers of the pilot curriculum grapple with a sense of threat to their identities that the pilot course provoked.

Teacher Narratives

As Asao Inoue says in his "Foreword" to the collection *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*, "white teachers must tread differently than teachers of color" (xiii). He continues:

> One might think of it as cooking in someone else's kitchen. You don't know where all the spices are. You don't know what they're saving for next week's dinner. You don't know what set of plates or silverware to use. You don't know that their oven runs a little hot. You don't really know what to bring and cook in their kitchen. (xiii-xiv)

Inoue is asking white teachers who enter the arena of antiracist teaching to bring humility to the task. As a method for bringing humility into our antiracist work for this article, we adopt the framework proposed by Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, and Neil Simpkins in their essay "Making Commitments to Racial

Justice Actionable." They argue that narratives about one's own experience are valuable if they involve a "willingness to be disturbed" that leads to personal work on the self in conjunction with interactive work with others with a commitment to institutional change (20). The narratives below reflect both a commitment among the teachers to accept their discomfort and learn from it and the courage to continue the work.

Author 2: Being the Elephant in the Room: Talking About Race with a Teacher of Color

The campus climate that provoked the need for a cultural competencies initiative also created an atmosphere of fear for people who look like me, one that included but went beyond a fear for our physical safety. I am a second generation, dark-skinned Indian American man, and my classrooms are largely white. This demographic reality provoked in me a sense of anxiety, stemming from my subject position and body in the classroom space.

As Tim Wise notes in his 2007 talk on the pathology of privilege at Mt. Holyoke, people of color do not embody "the aesthetic that is needed on too many campuses and too many communities around the country, in order to come in and give [talks on race]" (00:01:25-00:01:33). That is, people of color who talk to white people about their own experiences and knowledge of racism may not be believed. My anxieties about teaching the course are an illustration of this reality for teachers of color speaking about race in the classroom. I wondered how I was perceived by white students, especially since I was teaching about race and difference. I worried that my students might be hostile to me and to the course content, and not just in their writing. I worried that I wouldn't be taken seriously, that I'd be dismissed as the brown man with a chip on his shoulder, making a big fuss out of "non-issues." I wondered what I'd have to do to be taken seriously, how I'd have to perform.

My double-consciousness also stemmed from years of contending with the perpetual foreigner stereotype from white people, even well-meaning ones—the "Where are you from?" and "Your English

is so good!" sort. I had received student evaluations that said I used too many big words in lectures, that I was trying too hard to prove I was smart. These are comments that one of my brown-skinned mentors from South Asia had similarly received. I was still trying to prove I belonged in the academy despite having earned a seat at the table.

My anxieties were compounded by how most of my students received the course material—with silence. A handful of students engaged on a regular basis, but I didn't have the rich conversations I had had teaching an advanced composition class centered on racial literacy. That had been an exceptional class, with students who were willing to explore institutional and systemic racism and their own subjectivities and lived experiences. They engaged each other in robust critical discussions, managing and responding to readings from Victor Villanueva, Eula Biss, Claudia Rankine, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. They wrote substantial, inquiry-driven research papers on subjects of personal interest they encountered during the term. And some of them experienced moments of transformation brought on by the critical reading and writing required in the class.

I went into the pilot course expecting a similar experience, and quite confident in my ability to help a class navigate challenging, controversial, and thought-provoking content on identity and writing. My students' assignments suggested that they were challenging their own assumptions and that the course readings were resonating with them, but any meaningful participation in class required my teasing out responses and negotiating lengthy periods of silence.

My mind went to some unsettling places. I wondered if my students' writing was honest. Were they closet racists who weren't comfortable saying aloud what was in their hearts? Would it be easier for them to talk if I were white? These concerns only intensified when I observed Author 4's class watching Tim Wise's documentary, *White Like Me*. His students seemed interested and invested in the conversation. They shared their personal thoughts about their own raced bodies. I was envious. It seemed to confirm

my suspicion that my body wasn't credible, that my expertise and my truths were undermined by my race.

That was until Author 1 let me know that in a student interview that was part of the study, one of my white students claimed that I wouldn't have had as much authority on the subject of race if I weren't a teacher of color. I was surprised. I hadn't entertained the possibility that my body might give me a stronger ethos in a class exploring subjects of race and difference. Hearing my student's perspective didn't subvert my belief that my body might be a barrier in the classroom, but it did make the possibility of exceptions more palpable.

Silence is hardly the worst thing a writing instructor, especially one of color, will encounter in the classroom. And thinking back on the experiences I have had with several students over the years sharing racially insensitive and openly hostile perspectives in their assignments, I now recognize that the silence in the classroom likely stemmed from a desire for social safety. Amy Winans, whose work focuses on racial literacy education in rural institutions, explains this phenomenon: "Most white students perceive being racist as socially unacceptable in the middle-class environment of the campus, particularly within the classroom" ("Local" 257). The silence may have been a response to the "threat of being perceived as racist" (257)—a powerful external motivator that is often tied to students' sense of goodness and innocence. In other class contexts, where students' racial animus is displayed on the page, much of their hostility has been directed toward loaded contemporary social issues, including police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. In these instances, I realize that my body may not be a conscious barrier for students, especially because I'm a non-black instructor of color.

I must acknowledge my own privilege in the classroom as a male and as a "model minority." Performing an assertive masculinity has worked to my advantage in getting students to take me seriously. The model minority myth may also be operating in strengthening my ethos with white students. And I have a sense of what my female

colleagues and other colleagues of color have to contend with in their roles as antiracist teachers. While I may be able to wield my privilege for good, however, I recognize that doing so carries the risk of reinforcing attitudes supporting male dominance, or reinforcing a racial outlook steeped in anti-black racism. And so, I constantly work to perform a different masculinity in the classroom, to acknowledge my advantages but also share my story with my students – making it clear that race affects me in ways that it doesn't affect *most* of them. As a person of color, I can't take myself out of the conversation, especially in classes about race and difference. I cannot hope to have credibility and authenticity to my students, to myself, and antiracist education otherwise.

Reframing student silence based on a deeper understanding of white students' emotions has helped me better articulate why antiracist pedagogies are needed in writing instruction. The first-year writing classroom can be an ideal space to engage the subject of race, "in part because a key dimension of students' analytical writing skills entails their recognizing the situated nature of their experiences and the interpretive lenses through which they engage with the world, our readings, and their writing" (Winans, "Cultivating" 476). We can cultivate these analytical writing skills in classes with racial literacy outcomes because racial literacy development itself is so dependent on active, intentional critical evaluation of a variety of structures and experience.

Furthermore, given the wide range of ways our students engage with our worrisome and even maddening social, political, and cultural moment, the risks of not making antiracism central to our teaching are too great to downplay. As Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz suggests, "A pedagogy of racial literacy in FYC [...] can not only build students' reading and writing skills but can also provide them with a framework to make sense of the social injustices they will experience or witness as Americans" (388).

The exposure to different world views about language and identity is not something we can afford to leave out of the classroom space. The discomfort of silence in the classroom can be a valuable

tool for writing teachers looking to make antiracism an organizing principle of their writing pedagogy. And learning to negotiate our students' silence can help us develop the resilience needed to handle racial stress of our own. Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins suggest that we need to confront our discomfort and allow ourselves to be disturbed as part of the long-term commitment and sustained effort required for racial justice agendas (20). Robin DiAngelo also foregrounds the need for regular self-reflection and the importance of intentional, ongoing personal work toward active antiracism. According to DiAngelo, part of this effort for people of color involves their "working to identify internalized racial oppression" (*What Does It Mean* 331). Sealey-Ruiz mirrors this argument in suggesting that the goals of racial literacy are not only for white people to "adopt an antiracist stance" but also for people of color to "resist a victim stance" (386). And so, I believe that meditating on my vulnerability helped set the stage for me to have my own transformative moment—to move away from the assumption that my body of color was the problem.

Every class I have taught since the pilot curriculum has reaffirmed my sense of ability and commitment to antiracist pedagogies in writing instruction, and I continue to include cultural competencies outcomes in all of my classes regardless of focus—from rhetorics of health and medicine, to eco rhetorics, to developmental writing. We can do justice to this work despite our hangups, if only we think of the discomfort as an opportunity for growth.

Author 3: Students' Gendered Expectations and Active Resistance

The majority of students in my section of the pilot course expressed willingness to be open minded, at least until they were confronted with their own white fragility and privilege. When critical self-reflection became challenging for students, I observed a negative shift towards me, which I interpreted as a distraction. My own white fragility led me to internalize the negativity, which created a barrier between us. Further into the semester, however, I

learned to be okay with student perceptions of me, because I could see the benefits of their collaborative work with other students, and the value of having a space to discuss tough topics with people their age. My commitment to teaching about racial awareness emerged out of the challenges I faced with my own insecurity as a white woman teaching the pilot course.

I had chosen to focus on gender in the first unit of the course, and I had felt palpably the white male students' expectations of me to be a nurturing mother figure. I invited Author 4 to visit my class for a discussion of gendered expectations of teachers. Students revealed that they expected male teachers to be stricter than females, and they were accustomed to female teachers being more lenient and personally available. Their subsequent behavior in class did not improve. Several young white men, whom I came to think of as the "back-row boys," clustered together in the back of the class and stone-faced me for entire class periods. Their anger impacted other students and increased the silence in the room.

The silence led me to change tactics, privileging small group work over whole class discussions. I put the back-row boys in a group together, and though they still resisted me, they did engage in the material with each other. I started practicing the "think, pair, share" model: I gave students time to reflect independently in writing before discussing what they wrote with partners or small groups. They engaged, but when it came time for the large group share, the conversations fell flat. Seeing the difference between students' engagement with their peers and their engagement with me revealed that students in fact did want to talk about race, racism, and culture – just not directly with their teacher.

I learned that well designed group tasks leading to conversations about the course materials were perhaps more beneficial to students than any lecture or contributions I could make, because students *were* being challenged – but they were working through their discomfort on their terms. Structuring small group activities for students to analyze texts' perspectives afforded them the opportunity to discuss issues in the texts without having to claim personal positions. The

continual group engagement increased students' comfort levels with their classmates. By the middle of the semester, they were arguably more comfortable facing judgment from their peers and having a dialogue about it than fearing judgment from me. I now realize that their fear of judgment may have been part of their resistance to me.

The realization that I was projecting students' fear of judgment onto my gender was a teaching moment for me in understanding that my gender may have been less of a problem than their perceived lack of compassion from me. And what I did not realize at the time was that they were getting compassion from their classmates, even when engaging in dialogue across difference. One student of color emailed me after the course to thank me for exposing the class to the topics at hand. She commented that other teachers seem unwilling to discuss racially charged material, and that she was grateful our class did. Her email affirmed the importance for instructors to address race in our classrooms so our students of color do not end up bearing the brunt of educating white students.

My revelation about the need to express compassion motivates me to continue to be critically reflective of my positionality and my pedagogy. I am just beginning to see how acknowledging my gender and not my race derailed my ethos as a teacher of cultural competencies. As the pilot course continued, I consciously tried to let go of my expectations for particular ways I wanted students to change in line with progressive goals, and let them draw their own conclusions. Robin DiAngelo says that in conversing about racial injustice with another white person that "[u]limately, I let go of changing the other person. If someone gains insight from what I share, that is wonderful. But the objective that guides me is my own need to break with white solidarity, even when it's uncomfortable, which it almost always is" (*White Fragility* 151). In letting go of my insecurity surrounding not feeling respected as a woman, I learned that students who harbor racist sentiment will at least entertain the material I present to the class—regardless of my gender—*because* I am white. The pilot course enabled me to see racial privilege as an access point for white people to embody anti-racist pedagogy, and

the need to engage Diab, Ferrel, Godbee, and Simpkins' concept of being willing to be disturbed.

Author 4: My White Body Fails Me

When I told my friend Author 2 that as a white man, I hadn't felt qualified to teach this class, he looked surprised and responded, "I feel that as a white man you are obligated to talk about race in the FYC classroom!" Granted that straight, white, married males carry authority and status. When I started teaching for the pilot study, I began from a place of authority. I had never faced the challenges to my authority that my professor wife has faced. I had never felt that my authority could be challenged until I taught First-Year Writing focused on racial literacy. Although I nominally acknowledged my own privilege, I had fooled myself into thinking that my years of teaching experience granted me authority. When talking about race, or other facets of identity such as gender, sexuality, or disability, however, I didn't feel that I had any authority. I felt unauthorized to talk about race for two reasons. First, most of the students of color dropped my class within the first week. Second, my students seemed more conversant than I was in talking about race, gender, and sexuality.

Before I taught this class, I always had some "welcome back to school" schtick prepared for the first day. In this class, I instead explained how students would read academic articles about race as well as some on gender, sexuality, and national/religious identities. I also stressed how I wouldn't tolerate racist, sexist, and homophobic language in the classroom or in written assignments. I said as much on the syllabus. In my mind, I saw these provisos as inviting students of color into the conversation.

But I was wrong. By the second week of class, all but one of the students of color had dropped the class. I struggled to understand why. Weren't my provisos enough? Didn't I set the tone for a serious and culturally respectful class? Sure, dropping is a natural part of college in my experience. This time, however, the whole semester I felt the tension between my antiracist, leftist identity and the fact that the students of color left my course so soon. I figured I had been

a racist after all.

But I held onto one hope: maybe facilitating discussions on race with the students who stayed in my course would allow me to feel like a professional again. When I showed the Tim Wise documentary, *White Like Me,* my students wrote about and shared the implications behind unfair lending and housing practices after World War II. I found the students' insights into how whiteness granted privilege so riveting that I wrote them on the board. I said very little and simply transcribed their ideas. Transcribing without judgment illustrates how I was applying Ratcliffe's concept of rhetorical listening (17). Practicing rhetorical listening allowed one of my students to assert Wise's possible hypocrisy, while another student said he was just using his privilege for allyship. I hadn't taught them that. I became their scribe.

While teaching this class I felt unauthorized and invalidated and felt some empathy with my women colleagues. Why would I ever want to teach this class again? I wanted to run back to my white privilege and male privilege where my white body affords me solace, authority, and certainty. But that's the problem with whiteness, isn't it? I can retreat to it. I can wrap myself in it any time I like. I have the ultimate buffer between my privileged experiences and the raw experiences of women students and students of color. Yeah, I'm the one who needs the cultural competencies. In my necessary discomfort and uncertainty, I concluded the following:

- If white, straight males do it correctly, they should feel incredibly uncomfortable when teaching a cultural competencies writing class.
- Teaching this class gave me some insight into how white male privilege derives from a history of subjugating and oppressing nonwhite, nonmale bodies.
- Race, racial identity, and the raced body are as material in talking about composing academic discourse as are the paragraph, topics of invention, paper drafting and revising, and the thesis statement.

When I was teaching the pilot class, I saw a very narrow context of application for the curriculum. Now, however, I see how this curriculum can work in other writing classes. Doing cultural competencies work helped me see that privilege, race, and class issues connect to science and science-denial within the nuances in political Climate Change discussions. And as I created a Feminism and STEM writing class, I brought my three aforementioned insights into the course design. I will be vulnerable again. If I'm lucky, I will once again listen and record what my students share, write, and discuss. I am ready to be their scribe again.

Student Responses

All three teachers entered their classrooms most concerned about authority. They eventually discovered that the students were capable of developing their own authority through their writing and their work with each other. In a class focused on writing and talking about race, teacher authority was less relevant to students than it was to the teachers. Author 2's students were writing more than they talked. Author 3's students were more capable of talking to each other in groups than they were of responding directly to the teacher. And Author 4's students proved they didn't need the teacher's lecture to engage the issues that the materials offered. Author 4 became a scribe—writing on the board the conclusions the groups reached so that everyone in the class could benefit. It makes sense that collaborative learning is a successful pedagogical model in classes where students are gaining racial literacy. Working towards conversational ease in discussing racial topics requires practice, with students working it out with peers, not authority figures.

The teachers' concern with authority was linked to white fragility (in themselves or their students). To survive the racial stress that accompanies talking about race, they needed to feel that their students respected them. Among students, however, there was no sign that white fragility was a factor. They didn't appear defensive

about the subject matter, but rather engaged enthusiastically with each other during the classes and during the group interviews.

In interviews that Author 1 conducted with first-year undergraduates who took the classes, she discovered that many students found the pilot class valuable because they had been given a chance to work through issues about race with each other. These issues were coming up in their extra-curricular lives. The class materials were giving them a chance to practice this sort of discussion, rather than avoid it, and some found it cathartic. Even white students who acknowledged their conservative politics said that the curriculum was important for students in their first year. They told Author 1 that gaining a racial literacies background was helping them to understand the context of both national and local discussions about race. Most described their teachers as good facilitators. They did not feel that their teachers' opinions were being foisted upon them. Students of color whom Author 1 interviewed demonstrated an unmistakable excitement about class discussions in which they and students like them served as cultural experts on racial matters.

Some first-year white students, however, complained that we were not teaching writing. A representative example came from an interview with a white male student whose temporary pseudonym was "Sting": *"I have many interests and I feel like we spent a lot of time on [one] segment when [. . .] I'd like to explore . . . other interests . . . in a writing class."* Some of their peers of color disagreed. The difference seemed to lie in familiarity with the issues in the readings. Many students of color embraced the readings as relevant to their lives for a change. The following conversation interrogates white students' responses like Sting's. The group is composed of a light-skinned, multiracial woman (Janis), an African immigrant (Armadillo), and a gender fluid white student (Axle).

Janis: *"I talked to a girl the other day during class, and she said that it frustrated her that it was so much about just all these big topics. She said she wanted to learn more about the writing part of it, not the material that we were learning. Like she didn't want to learn about the material, she just*

wanted to write and that's it. But I think they kind of go together, you know, you learn about it because you're writing about it."

Armadillo: *"We actually talked about that yesterday because I heard someone mention [. . .] that we were only learning about black lives matter [rather] than normal [readings], because basically the class has been the racial issues that are going on in the U.S. right now, and they were sort of like complaining about that."*

Armadillo's response to that student's complaint is to list the writing assignments and then compare the topic to other topics he has encountered in writing classes. He continues:

Armadillo: *"I mean you've learned how to visually analyze, you've learned textual analysis, and we're learning synthesis so this is like about a different issue. It would be the same thing like if you were reading something Shakespeare wrote or something like that. I don't see the issue over [the class] being [focused on] this subject matter because it kind of pertains to you. So I don't see any argument to that, but people [still do]."*

Below, Janis and Axle explain the importance of the perspectives essay in challenging students to present the arguments of perspectives other than their own.

Janis: *"Yes, like for a couple of our assignments we had to look at all the sides. For example, like our last assignment, I was writing about the Muslim [ban] and stuff and the people on the banned [list] from the six countries that Trump acted on. So it was hard for me to like not take sides when I was writing about it. Like I had to try to leave my biases out of it ... by doing it [writing the essay]. It doesn't mean I agree with what [a particular perspective is] saying, it helps me better to understand why they think those things."*

Axle: *"I mean, it just broadens your understanding of it. Really ... I like the fact that when we had like our last paper, that we had to specifically write about three different perspectives. Like we couldn't just [pick one], and we had to completely avoid talking from our own perspective. We had to really just understand every perspective and that was ... that's like really meaningful because then you can like, if you're caught up in an argument outside of class then... like with somebody else who has a completely different perspective [than] you, you can actually understand because you actually researched it."*

Students' focus on the activities in the class—the rhetorical

knowledge gleaned from writing the papers and the practical knowledge gained by researching three perspectives on the same issue—is congruent with the teachers' discovering that their own knowledge and authority was much less important than the activities that students accomplished together.

Conclusion

We adopted the cultural competencies curriculum for the incoming TAs for the following fall semester. The focus on cultural competencies in the first-year writing curriculum has continued into its seventh year with two new Directors of Composition, first Rachael Ryerson and then Paul Shovlin. Racial literacy became more popular in the wave of protests against the torture and death of George Floyd. Continuity is important in antiracist pedagogy. Perfect antiracist pedagogy, however, doesn't exist. Pimentel, Pimentel, and Dean conclude that "antiracist pedagogies are never simple or complete. Rather, writing instructors must be intentionally reflective on their pedagogical practices and constantly adjust their practices to address newly realized forms of whiteness and/or racism" (120).

The need to remain aware of the messages one's body brings into the classroom and to undergo continual adjustment given the identities of students is important in any classroom, but it is amplified when a course objective is helping students become comfortable talking about race. Much of the unease that teachers of the pilot classes felt had its roots in white fragility. Author 2 was most concerned about what he perceived as the white fragility of his own students when confronted with an instructor of color speaking about race. Author 3 saw gender as an effective evasive tactic, anticipating that conversations on race would prove too fraught for her students. Author 4 saw his own body, and therefore his own white fragility, as a barrier to his ability to teach the class effectively.

All participants have adjusted their practices. All have done the work of reflection which is necessary to an antiracist pedagogy. Author 2 was anxious because of the way he looks—his dark skin tone and

"foreign" look might make him seem like an unreliable narrator for the class material. The fact of his students' relative silence during class discussions seemed to affirm his fears. But there was also counter-evidence. The quality and depth of the students' writing assignments told a different story, along with information from an interview with some of his students. Author 2's research into Amy Winan's work helped him understand other possible reasons for his students' silence. And he allowed his awareness of male privilege and the need for people of color to interrogate their internalized racism to complicate his teacher stance. All of this required constant adjustment, as Author 2 continued to use antiracist pedagogy beyond the pilot class into two different teaching positions with different student demographics. After earning his Ph.D., he accepted a Postdoctoral Fellowship in a private university where his colleagues sought his advice on antiracist pedagogy and his students were no longer predominantly white. Now he is a tenure-track Director of Composition at a regional public university with a diverse student population.

Author 3's discomfort also came out of students' silence, which she felt as disrespect coming from a group of male students when she was trying to disrupt gender expectations.[7] She made a major adjustment in her pedagogy, moving from teacher-led discussions to peer interaction in pairs or small groups. Gradually Author 3 was able to rethink her assumptions about teacher authority, coming to the conclusion that students were gaining authority collectively by engaging in this tough work with each other. As students gained their own authority, Author 3 was able to loosen her grip on the outcome of that work. After the pilot course, Author 3 adapted the cultural competencies goals to fit a food-themed first-year writing course in which she examined issues surrounding race, identity, culture, immigration, and oppression through food and food related practices. Her consistency in taking an anti-racist approach to teaching first-year writing continued into her Postdoctoral Fellowship at a major state university and now in her job at a private university where she has developed a course that examines rhetorical communication across differences that she will be teaching both in the university and

in a prison.

Author 4 was uncomfortable because he felt his expertise was diminished by the antiracist course materials. Author 4's distress came out of a history of taking for granted his authority as a white male. He felt rejected by the students of color who dropped his class, and one-upped by his students' group reports that revealed insights beyond his own. Author 4 was given the opportunity to realize that his previous teaching had been predicated on the banking model that Paulo Freire had worked against in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Accepting his vulnerability changed his perspective on teaching science writing. He was able to inhabit the perspectives of other minoritized teachers. Author 4 went on to develop an advanced composition course in Women and Science Writing to make more visible the contributions of women to the field of science while analyzing their underrepresentation. He is now teaching at a large midwestern university.

Author 4's discomfort with teaching material he couldn't relate to was echoed in Sting's comment about wishing to write about topics more relevant to him as a white male. But the majority of the students Author 1 interviewed were excited to have a classroom in which they could read and write about perspectives they hadn't been asked to consider before in a class. And instead of having just a unit on difference, students of color were treated to an entire term for which their life experiences had prepared them.

As then Director of Composition, Author 1's anxiety had been based on her predictions that white fragility would complicate the success of TAs who would be required to teach the cultural competencies curriculum if the pilot section led to its formal adoption. As a white professor and supervisor, she was subverting white solidarity, one of the causes of white fragility, according to DiAngelo. A veteran TA who taught the teacher training class one day reported that "TA's unanimously voiced the sentiment that issues of cultural competency are extremely important to address, but they're feeling like they don't quite have the training/apparatus they need (but…does anyone?)." Author 1 was reminded of DiAngelo:

"Whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides" (DiAngelo, *White Fragility* 55). Author 1 was also reminded of Garcia de Mueller and Ruiz, whose survey results revealed that though all WPAs believed that race should play an important role in the first-year writing curriculum, white WPAs thought that the responsibility for implementing it should not be on them, because they didn't feel qualified. As a result of white WPAs taking a pass, the issue of race gets little attention in first-year curricula. And this tendency toward avoidance, although understandable, is unsustainable if we want writing programs that value the voices and experiences of all our students.

Notes

[1] IRB # 16-X-411

[2] The study hoped to (1) gain an understanding of how to effectively facilitate discussions about race and difference in First-Year Writing classrooms, (2) influence students' abilities to negotiate emotional conversations about race and difference with each other productively, and (3) engage students in critical reflection on their own assumptions and attitudes regarding race, difference, and identity.

[3] The OU Composition Program holds that writing and reading are significantly interdependent and always emerge in reciprocal social interactions. These social interactions—and the conventions that enable and constrain them—vary among different communities of writers or disciplines and are always mediated by genres. We also hold that writing both influences and is influenced by identity, and that writing communities and their genres enable and constrain some identities while disallowing others, which requires writers to make choices to conform to or resist those identities. Finally, we affirm that writing occurs in many different modes (print, visual, audio, digital, etc.) and emerges through ongoing processes of invention, production, collaboration, and revision. These outcomes support the habits of mind described in the "Framework for Success in Post-Secondary Writing," a document co-written by the National Council of Teachers of English, The Council of Writing Program Administrators, and the National Writing Project. The habits of mind are curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition.

[4]While racial literacy and cultural competencies are nuanced frameworks, they share enough overlap that we use both terms interchangeably from this point forward.

[5]Carl Rogers was a 20th century American psychologist who influenced writing teachers such as Peter Elbow to incorporate careful listening to other's perspectives in small group work. He is known for the technique that therapists use when they paraphrase a client's utterances before moving on.

[6]Following the pilot study, TA's were trained to teach the Cultural Competencies goals through a summer orientation class as well as during a pedagogy class during their first semester.

[7]Author 1's article on the cultural competencies curriculum was published in Daniel Richard's edited collection *On Teacher Neutrality* in 2020.

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