

Recursive Interventions: A Coalitional Approach to Anti-Racist Pedagogy at Middle Tennessee State University

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This vignette narrates the beginning of our anti-racist coalition at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). We are both fairly new in our positions at MTSU. Erica Cirillo-McCarthy is finishing her third year as the University Writing Center (UWC) Director, and Erica Stone started her new position as Associate Director of General Education English (GEE) in Fall 2020. Our outsider positioning helped us recognize the need for anti-racist programs in our academic units, and we were unaware of any programmatic history or interdepartmental or institutional politics that might have stopped previous attempts. As new faculty, we asked questions, built relationships, and revealed something important about anti-racist work: it is recursive, reflective, and requires intersectional coalitions (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019, p. 133) that allow for snowballing efforts. As interpersonal connections are made and trust is established, a coalition's work picks up speed and space, gathering more collaborators, expanding not only its range but its power. Writing this vignette afforded us the time and space to consider our work up to this point and highlight the germane components of our coalition by sharing our stories with WPA readers.

ERICA STONE'S STORY

Prior to moving to Middle Tennessee in July 2020, I'd spent four years organizing, researching, and teaching about Kansas City's racist housing policies, food access inequality, and unequal healthcare availability. After spending most of 2020 watching my city erupt in weeks of civil unrest over the deaths of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and countless victims of racist violence across the United States, I was even more determined to continue recognizing, revealing, rejecting, and replacing (Walton et. al., 2019) oppressive practices and policies as a teacher-scholar. Through this lived experience and positionality (and with quite a lot of privilege), I came to Middle Tennessee looking for ways to carry on my community-centered work in a new city and state with the understanding that place-based work is not immediately transferable and requires a relational foundation that is difficult to establish in the midst of a global pandemic.

As a brand-new PhD and first-time tenure-track faculty member, I joined the General Education English (GEE) team's remote planning ses-

sions for our Fall 2020 Orientation and Curriculum Meeting and tried to contribute meaningful work without a contextualized knowledge of the GEE program's ongoing anti-racist work (e.g., directed self-placement; labor-based grading). As a community organizer, I recognize the power of precise and transparent language as an activist practice. During one of our planning sessions in May 2020, I noted the presence of anti-racist work within GEE, but identified an absence of precise language describing it. As such, the GEE team made a concerted effort to be more transparent in our language by creating anti-racist pedagogy modules in our GenEd English Online Community that provided specific instruction on contract and labor-based grading practices. Additionally, we added an online 'faculty lounge' where we invited faculty and graduate students to talk asynchronously about anti-racist readings and share resources. Even though the program was already working on anti-racist projects such as directed self-placement and labor-based grading, the GEE team agreed that the addition of explicit language describing our work as anti-racist would further promote equity and inclusion within our GEE professional development sessions and our decidedly anti-racist orientation to first-year writing and general education administration.

In addition to reviewing our programmatic goals and curricular expectations, our Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 Curriculum Meetings featured workshops on anti-racist syllabus design, inclusive class content, microaggression intervention strategies, and labor-based assessment procedures, which focused specifically on our first-year writing courses (Perryman-Clark & Lamont Craig 2019; Cowan, 2020; Inoue, 2019). Our workshops leaned heavily on the lived experiences of our faculty and focused on intentional reflection and recursive interventions of our own (often racist) actions and beliefs as individuals. Following Kendi (2019), we reminded our GEE faculty (and ourselves) that anti-racist work is recursive and reflective, and most importantly, never complete. In response to the positive feedback we received about the anti-racist pedagogies workshop, we invited graduate students and faculty from across the department to participate in an anti-racist pedagogies reflection group in Fall 2020, which grew into an intersectional coalition within the English Department that aims to combat departmental and institutional racism through egalitarian, community-based, and feminist administration practices (Ratcliffe & Rickly, 2010); graduate student and faculty workshops on anti-racist pedagogies; equitable and qualitative directed self-placement processes; and review and revision of policies.

ERICA CIRILLO-McCARTHY'S STORY

A screenwriting faculty member recently asked me if I was “one of those people who think grammar is racist,” right before she told me her Black students simply cannot write. I wish I could say she was the only faculty to express this sentiment, but that’s not true. I knew that I wanted to cultivate anti-racist writing center practices, but hesitated. “Can I do this as a junior faculty member? What will faculty like the screenwriting professor think?” Like many scholars, after the summer of 2020, it became clear: if white scholars don’t explicitly engage in anti-racist practice now, when will they? I sent off a memo to my dean describing anti-racist writing center practice and my intentions.

Our weekly tutor education meetings started to focus explicitly on oppressive language practices, impressing upon tutors that higher education practices and pedagogies sustain and reproduce white privilege and white supremacy by centering white, middle class writing practices (Inoue, 2019). Many of them already sense that the elevation of one variety of English as the standard is arbitrary, anti-rhetorical, and serves only to punish students of color using other English varieties (Greenfield, 2011); however, tutors tend to see their tutoring role as one with limited power/agency. They have openly expressed to me that they have very little hope that change can occur within higher education. This is one way white supremacy works: it convinces everyone that they are powerless cogs in a machine so that no one fights to change the status quo. To that end, I develop ongoing tutor education that facilitates a shift in how tutors understand their role: from one that has no power and thus has no options but to capitulate to the status quo, to one that can—and in fact, has an ethical responsibility to—be explicitly anti-racist (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011). After reading the variety of ways BIPOC students experience writing centers (Green, 2016; Burrows, 2016; Epps-Robertson, 2016; Martinez, 2016), tutors critique tutoring practices that encourage students to erase or obscure linguistic variety just to get through one class or one assignment. Then, tutors identify practices that facilitate complex discussions with students about racist institutional structures, like higher education, while inviting students to consider ways they can rhetorically negotiate racist pedagogical practices.

I saw evidence of this shift last week when a panel of tutors presented on anti-racist tutoring pedagogy at our regional writing center conference. They are not 100% comfortable using the terms anti-racist pedagogy and writing center practices, but by talking about linguistic variety and white supremacy in assignments and assessment practices in such a public venue, I see growth in their understanding of the important role anti-racist writ-

ing center practice serves in resisting and subverting oppressive language practices in higher education.

Anti-racist tutoring pedagogy resonates with undergraduate tutors who also take my tutoring pedagogy course, but writing center administrators also train English department graduate students who tutor as part of their assistantship. Literature graduate students tend to have internalized the concept of a standard English, so one hour a week of anti-racist discussion felt inadequate. Anti-racist graduate education implies facilitating paradigm shifts about diversity, language, and education, all which demand time, labor, and emotion (Ahmed, 2012; Micciche, 2016; Miller-Cochran, 2018). Thankfully, these graduate students enroll in a pedagogy course taught by our GEE director or associate director in their first semester, allowing the two administrators to amplify anti-racist concepts and pedagogy.

OUR COALITION'S STORY

Ultimately, sustainable anti-racist pedagogy must be shouldered by more than one person or unit, and its pedagogical efficacy lies with students engaging with anti-racist concepts in multiple contexts. Because so much of our time was taken up with listening and relationship building, and all of the other things that take up new junior faculty time, we did not realize that each of us contributed to anti-racist programming in our respective units—units that are discrete and yet overlap in important ways. We now meet formally each month in the anti-racist pedagogy reflection group started by Erica Stone. She has expertly moved our reflective group towards the action stage, while also growing the group. Coalitioning, in our context, means actively identifying stakeholders and then growing the group through interpersonal outreach. Inviting people who have departmental history allows us to recognize and reveal racist historical practices. We also worked mindfully to avoid an all-white group of participants by personally inviting BIPOC colleagues to join. We knew, though, that we had to encourage their participation without making them feel like they would have to do the heavy lifting as BIPOC members of the group, an all-too-common (and admittedly goodhearted) mistake in anti-racist academic groups. To avoid this pitfall, we are committed to recursive reflection and evaluative feedback from our BIPOC coalition members, and we prioritize their lived experiences and concerns during our discussions. But we also understand that our eagerness and sincerity isn't enough to persuade our colleagues that this isn't just another anti-racist academic group, and so we work on expanding our definition of coalitioning to include multiple positionalities and various ways to coalition. Another issue of which we were

mindful is the potential in these groups to do a collective reading but then stop short of action. We wanted to ensure we moved our coalition from reading and discussion toward ethical and policy-driven action, which is what we're focused on as this issue goes to press in May 2021. Then collaboratively, in a multivocal way that decenters whiteness, our ever-growing snowball of anti-racist practitioners can reject and replace racist pedagogy with anti-racist pedagogy and oppressive practices with inclusive policies.

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