

What James Baldwin Taught Me About WPA Work

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I include James Baldwin's work in all my first-year writing courses. I have done so since I first began teaching as a MA student. I did not read any of Baldwin's work before I attended college, and my introduction to his essays was couched between the work of two critical pedagogues: Paulo Freire and bell hooks. I took a course on composition theory, and, at the time, my professor suggested that reading Baldwin was necessary to understanding the practice of critical pedagogy and not only the theory of it. As a college professor and critical pedagogue now, I am unsure if I fully agree with my former professor's suggestion, but I do understand what he meant. I do not think one needs to read Baldwin to fully articulate critical pedagogy, though it might be useful. The multifaceted nature of Baldwin's writing, character, and life show that one can both *practice* critical pedagogy and *live* critical pedagogy. To *practice* critical pedagogy is to consciously consider it, while to *live* critical pedagogy is to make it integral to one's very existence. To practice and to live are two different actions, and, given the vagaries of contemporary analog and digital life, students desperately need to understand the difference.

As a writing program administrator, I am first a teacher. In assigning Baldwin's work in my first-year writing courses, I noticed that some students do not understand the reality of his work and how it speaks directly to white supremacy. For some students, white supremacy is an illness of past generations and societies. Within the classroom, the most useful strategy is to create opportunities to understand and produce knowledge that challenges prevalent power structures (Freire 29–32). Baldwin's work forces students to acknowledge not only their own ignorance but also their own preconceived ideas of reality. For example, a short essay my students find illuminating is Baldwin's "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" In the essay, Baldwin argues that "Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him."

My students enjoy reading and analyzing Baldwin's "Black English" essay because it challenges them to understand the role of language inside and outside the classroom. While rote memorization, grammatical study, and literary text once dominated the first-year writing classroom, contemporary writing pedagogy values the process of writing rather than the

product of writing (Berlin; Crowley; Miller). This is what makes Baldwin so identifiable to students: They are learning about the role of language in their lives while Baldwin wrote about the role of language in his life. Students can partly identify with his perspective. To many students, the idea of dialect and vernacular is not foreign. They recognize that people from different backgrounds speak and write in different ways; however, students often do not recognize the inherent value in speaking and writing through their lived dialect nor do they recognize the outcome of when some are denied the opportunity to speak and write through a lived dialect.

Most useful to students is Baldwin's directness. He does not dance around a topic for the benefit of his audience. Instead, Baldwin articulates a vision of the world that is dangerous, violent, and hateful. Yet, he leaves his readers with a small sense of hope because it is through critique that humans can make the world a better place. There is often a sense of unwillingness to confront issues that are difficult or sensitive because of the perceived uncontrollable outcome of such conversations (hooks 39–41). Passion can overwhelm students and affect behavior or interaction. But, bell hooks argues that it is necessary for such passion to occur. It is through this learning that students can better understand the multiculturalism that can help confront white supremacy and change the boundaries of knowledge within the classroom (44).

In many first-year writing curricula, students are asked to write and respond to assignment prompts. Depending on the instructor, such prompts may or may not be abstract; however, I have always found that with a clear focus on identifying and dismantling white supremacy in the classroom, students are provided an opportunity to use the space of the classroom to create a world of understanding. Language creates space and space is social in nature (Lefebvre 130–133). Through the social space of the classroom, instructors and students can confront white supremacy in thinking, writing, and curriculum. Instructors can create a social space, a space for dissent, and a democratic space in which students can work toward an understanding of the pervasiveness of white supremacy within contemporary society. It is in this type of space that students can become fully aware of the world they inhabit. Baldwin sums up this point in his "Talk to Teachers": "one of the paradoxes of education was that precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society. It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person" (685).

Within the classroom, instructors can assign almost anything that advances the learning outcomes of the course. The culture of the curriculum within the classroom becomes uniquely important because it drives the

use of and exploration of language. The curriculum and assessment of writing feeds into the power structures of the classroom, department, college, and overall university (Ball 370–79). Power structures are at the heart of Baldwin's writing and at the heart of the work of writing program administrators. In challenging power structures, writing program administrators find themselves in odd circumstances. Where Baldwin might attack such structures directly, writing program administrators might need to take a more covert approach. Still, there is much to be learned from Baldwin's focus on language and how it encourages or discourages us to create spaces of learning that confront white supremacy.

It is Baldwin's directness that writing program administrators should consider. Covert approaches to confronting white supremacy include tweaking curriculum to give stronger support to the cultural considerations of language. As a writing program administrator, I have a more global view of what happens in first-year writing classrooms. I review syllabi, course sheets, reading lists, textbook selections, and perform regular assessment. The space I inhabit as an administrator provides me with an incremental view of change within first-year writing curriculum. As a critical pedagogue, I want change now. I want action. I want movement. However, as a writing program administrator, I recognize that change is sometimes slow and significant action is often tepid. Such things do happen, but institutions are incapable of love and oft incapable of quick response to curriculum issues. Still, change does happen.

Baldwin's view to the world helps me strategize how to approach anti-racist work within writing curriculum and assessment. I characterize his approach in three parts: 1. A directness to purpose; 2. An acknowledgement of harm; and 3. A belief in change. The goal of any pedagogy should be inclusiveness and a clear practice toward working for something better. The prevalence of white supremacist language and practices both inside and outside higher education shows that there is tremendous work to be done. James Baldwin taught me that, as a writing program administrator, it is my duty to help students recognize the role of language in white supremacy and to help faculty understand the imperative to address such roles in the classroom and reconsider the brutal necessity of language in confronting the ills of the world.

Small changes to curriculum can have an enormous impact. Encouraging instructors to include more diverse readings or suggesting specific readings that confront white supremacy is a first step. Writing program administrators can create reading lists for faculty, and they can plan workshop series that address white supremacy and writing curriculum. These are both direct and simple actions that can inject antiracist pedagogy and thinking

into teaching and curriculum. While I might personally favor more dramatic action, I must recognize that other faculty members require time to acknowledge the need for change. Incorporating Baldwin's work into the classroom and encouraging other faculty members to use his work is an easy step to do so.

James Baldwin's work is not the only work a WPA might consider in laboring toward freeing curriculum of white supremacy. I am drawn to Baldwin's work for a personal reason: his queerness. Baldwin so expertly separated his identities as a civil rights essayist and as a queer fiction author that one might not even know he was queer if only reading his nonfiction work. I find this separation familiar and, in some ways, akin to the separation between a faculty member and a WPA faculty member. It is true that the separation is not as stark as Baldwin's, but, as a first-generation queer academic, I am acutely aware of such a separation because I have spent parts of my career navigating between various and, sometimes, contradictory identities. In pondering the navigations of their own identities and the work of fighting white supremacy in curriculum, WPAs might read in more depth Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, James Boggs, and Grace Lee Boggs. These are a few teachers and activists whose work finds a place when I consider how first-year writing curriculum can be revised to better suit 21st century thinking and antiracist pedagogical work.

I draw inspiration from both teachers and activists for one reason: Writing program administration is pedagogical activism. To be a WPA in a world increasingly hostile to higher education and learning, one must be an activist. To work for change, to inspire, to aid, and to love are all pedagogically sound ideas, and all are necessary in writing program administration.

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