

Can a Writing Center Pedagogy Reverse the New Racism?

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Introduction

As leaders in the academy, writing center workers model a practice—what Nanck Grimm called a *pedagogy of hope*¹—for bringing about a multicultural community. The foundation for such a community is the tutoring that occurs in the writing center. That’s because writing center tutors practice collaborative learning, or laboratory learning (Lerner), which will inevitably compel them (and us) to examine the rhetoric of the writers with whom they work. Through this examination, tutors and writers note, as Villanueva termed it, *the material reality of racism* (“Blind”). Patti Stock’s challenge that writing center workers take up the role of change agent² and Villanueva’s challenge to writing center tutors to practice rhetoric are not incompatible with Charles Ogeltree’s challenge to all of us—not to “be deterred from achieving what so many of our forefathers achieved [a ruling, *Brown v. the Board of Education*, aimed at material equality and real integration], in the face of even more formidable challenges”—a challenge “we must face with unrelenting dedication and commitment, and when we do so, we will not fail” (316). Writing center workers are agents of change whose practices will expose the new racism and reverse the resegregation³ occurring in our country.

The Problem: When Scarcity becomes Hegemony

In “‘Loaves and Fishes’: Acts of Scarcity and Abundance,” educator Parker Palmer writes that “The culture of scarcity thrives on dissatisfaction, and breeds it as

well” (132). Education in America is constantly under attack by those who are dissatisfied with student achievement. Take the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (2001), which brought about fear from both teachers and administrators. This fear, which stifled difference, resulted from the fact that most people equate good teaching and effective learning with high test scores (Shosh and Zales 77). In literacy classrooms, therefore, “Many [teachers] turned to low-level drill and practice sessions, leaving little time for students to read and write in authentic contexts” (Shosh and Zales 77). Palmer points out what can happen when one conception of quality (e.g., as expressed in the NCLB legislation) is deemed more appropriate than another:

The scarcity assumption pervades our institutional life by putting power into the hands of a few, and keeping it there. Hierarchies are always rooted in the belief that power itself is, or ought to be, a scarce commodity, rooted in the belief that few people are qualified to hold power, or that few should be allowed to hold it, lest the threatening abundance of power known as “democracy” come to pass.

From the teacher who grades on a curve to the administrator who rules by fiat, the control of the few over the many is rationalized by the scarcity assumption. 126 This is one reason why, in “Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center: Stories and Lessons from Two Beginners,” Nancy Barron and Nancy Grimm take a critical look at the writing center community’s celebration of diversity, on the one hand, and its championing acculturation, on the other. They note that, while difference in writing should be celebrated in a writing center, the writing center becomes, unfortunately, a place where students are encouraged to write as if there were no difference, in Standard Edited English.

Standard Edited English has hegemonic implications, particularly for persons of color. Lisa Delpit has pointed this out in her distinctive voice:

. . . I have come to understand that power plays a critical role in our society and in our educational system. The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential. Indeed, in the educational institutions of this country, the possibilities for poor people and for people of color to define themselves, to determine the self each should be, involve a power that lies outside of the self. It is others who determine how they should act, how they are to be judged. When one “we” gets to determine standards for all “wes,” then some “wes” are in trouble! (xv)

Catherine Prendergast explains just how hegemonic the literacy field has become in *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*. She writes, “the ideology of literacy has been sustained primarily as a response to perceived threats to White property interests, White privilege, the maintenance of ‘White’ identity, or the conception of America as a White nation” (7).

That the *Brown* decision helped desegregation efforts in the 1950s and to successes socially and in education we must view as significant. That, in the last twenty years, Supreme Court rulings and the inability of the federal government to fund desegregation programs at adequate rates have encouraged the resegregation of public schools we must view as frightening. Instead of integration and its material, social, and

intellectual abundance, we have been left with a scarcity principle that has resulted in the following:

- Unequal opportunities and unequal educational outcomes;
- Unlikely access to our nation's prosperity for persons of color;
- Higher high school dropout rates for persons of color;
- Lower graduation rates for persons of color;
- Less qualified teachers and support personnel as a result of lower wages;
- Fewer teachers of color as role models in public schools;
- Assigning students of color to lower-level programs as a result of tracking;
- Assigning whites to higher-level programs as a result of tracking;
- Honors or college preparatory classes not normally offered to students of color; and
- Placing students of color in special education and also identifying them as behaviorally difficult.⁴

Eric J. Cooper, President of the National Urban Alliance (NUA), points out that, currently, in America, we practice a *pedagogy of despair*, particularly for persons of color. Such a stance is marked by the following:

- Lower quality curriculums, larger class sizes, and fewer technologies and science/language laboratories;
- Overcrowded classrooms and rundown buildings for schools populated by persons of color;
- A lack of basic supplies as well as antiquated school books and materials;
- Inequities in staffing, student assignment, and transfer options;

- Concerns about school safety and violence;
- Testing that relegates persons of color to lower-achieving classes;
- Learning measured by standards erected by whites;
- Questioning discouraged;
- Testing mastery praised.⁵

The Writing Center Model: A Pedagogy of Hope⁷

Almost exactly like that described by the great Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who emphasized that *dialogue within and among culture groups would lead to critical consciousness*, one of the writing center field’s early leaders, Kenneth Bruffee announced that “a necessary intermediate step on the way to effective independence is effective interdependence . . .” (xv). Bruffee’s program demonstrated that *conversation among knowledgeable peers* would bring about community and concomitant material, intellectual, and social abundance. For almost thirty years now, the field has argued how far and with whom we should take that program of peer collaboration and conversation and its modifications. Some have opted to stay on the margins, cautious about being co-opted, secure in the rarefied air of their *idea* of writing center work, and then offering complaints about that marginalization. Others have accepted the challenge of becoming institutionalized—albeit in fits and spurts. Rather than being silent or timid, I would argue that, fifty-odd years after *Brown*, the only way writing center workers can deal with the systemic problems of race and class is systemically. That means the field needs to advance its writing center *pedagogy of hope*.

A pedagogy of hope, which can promote literacy and empowerment, is a decidedly writing center pedagogy, a problem-posing pedagogy in which learners become teachers and teachers become learners—face to face in centers, classrooms, or in parlors in the clouds to which everyone contributes and in which everyone participates. By practicing such a pedagogy, as Freire maintained, people “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (71).

Can we really replace scarcity with abundance?

For writing center workers to be the change agents Stock wrote about, they will have to make their risky move. In so doing, they will become our country’s intellectual and pedagogical engineers, helping us in this century to bring about the equality in education *Brown* was supposed to legalize in the last century. Then, we may replace scarcity with abundance. Consider what Cooper has placed as an epigraph on his website: “When we are able to break the glass ceiling for inner city children and see achievement gains go way beyond system expectations, that is when I am the proudest. To seize the opportunity to create hope out of despair—to see children and teachers’ eyes light up, with expectation and awareness that they can teach and learn complex concepts . . . wow!” Consider Palmer’s concern about waiting for the kairotic moment: “When we approach community as a project that can succeed if only we have the right technique, the right setting, the right goals, the right people, we are on the wrong track” (138). The scarcity assumption is a powerful preserver of the status quo, *hence resegregation, pedagogy of despair*, and a field of writing center workers still longing for “a place-

setting at the head of the table where the speaker's podium awaits . . ." (Harris 19). But Palmer tells us that "community is the context in which abundance can replace scarcity. Even more important, the very experience of community is itself an experience of abundance. . . . [A]s the crowd is replaced by community, an invisible sense of abundance arises long before the community produces any visible goods or services. True abundance resides in the simple experience of people being present to one another and for one another" (130). This sounds a lot like what Villanueva was suggesting we can do in the writing center, which has always allowed for the "gathering . . . into smaller, face-to-face communities" (Palmer 130). In fact, Villanueva says that, when we practice rhetoric in the writing center, we work "one with one." In so doing, we are in the context of Palmer's community, the context of "interpersonal abundance," that will make possible a constructive dialogue about race. Finally, about transformative leadership that may help us to confront the challenges described in this piece so that a multicultural community may be constructed, Palmer is sage as well:

Community and its abundance are always there, free gifts of grace that sustain us. The question is whether we will be able to perceive those gifts and receive them. That is likely to happen only when someone performs a vulnerable public act, assuming abundance but aware that others may cling to the illusion of scarcity.

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Those of us who work in the writing center assume abundance, "a mixing of our ideas and energies" (Palmer 129). Therefore, writing center leadership is absolutely necessary, and we may have to undertake the risky action of talking about race until every community tells a different—an abundant—story about race, one that invites into our

community colleagues from K-12, from Cooper's NUA, from HBCUs, and the like. We should make these invitations for abundance sake.

I have discussed two thinkers and workers—Cooper and Palmer—who are not in the writing center field but who might amplify it by helping us to think through how we accept Villanueva's challenge to practice rhetoric, to look to the language of those writers with whom we work, to look behind it, to see the material reality of racism. Cooper's is a loud voice, which I think we should bring into this dialogue. Palmer's thoughtful discussion about *scarcity* and *abundance* can be related to this discussion, particularly to *despair* (which results from *scarcity*) and to *hope* (which results from *abundance*). I also think that what Palmer has to say in his eloquent voice about abundance is what all of us know about the writing center: it is *that* place where people share what gifts they have and are willing to receive these gifts, adding to what they already possess cognitively and socially.

Another thinker outside of our discipline, Roberto A. Ibarra, discusses how to reframe the context of higher education. Ibarra's current research focuses on developing models for changing academic and corporate cultures. His *Beyond Affirmative Action* is based on an ethnographic research project to study Latino graduate students, faculty, administrators, and non-academics across the country. That study uncovered a significant new approach to diversity (an active, collaborative-learning, multi-contextual model) that offers a new paradigm for change. What Ibarra has to say about "low-context" teaching is related to Cooper's *pedagogy of despair* and to Palmer's discussion about *scarcity*. What Ibarra has to say about "high-context" *teaching and learning communities*, not only sounds like Grimm's and Cooper's *pedagogy of hope* and

Palmer's thoughts about *abundance*, but it also sounds like what we do (and have been asked to do more of by Villanueva) in the writing center. Yet, if what *we* do in the writing center stays in the writing center, if what *they* do in the health and fitness center stays in the health and fitness center, if what takes place in the library stays in the library, we make the scarcity assumption seem more credible. [7] Like Palmer and Cooper, Ibarra has an impressive resume, and his voice can tell us about useful empirical data to address the questions about race we have been trying to answer after hearing and reading Villanueva.

Conclusion

So, we are not alone—either in the writing center or outside of it—though it might seem that way sometimes as we all think about how to enter into the terribly important conversation about race, its repercussions, and the challenge race presents for constructing a multicultural community. This is important to keep in mind, because “we must have [and use] models for how to dive into, rather than turn away from, the fear, conflict, and uneasiness that often accompanies . . . discussions . . . about race, racism, literacy, and education. . . (Greenfeld and Rowan 10). The risk that writing center workers take to give the gift of community in the writing center, throughout the institution, and outside the institution will provide a model and a process for developing abundant conversations about these issues within a community of creative and critical thinkers. In so doing, *all* of us may well realize Thurgood Marshall's definition of “equal,” offered during the time of the *Brown* decision: “‘Equal’ means [everyone] getting the same thing, at the same time and in the same place.”

Notes

¹ In her keynote address for the 18th Annual Conference of the Northeast Writing Centers Association at Bryant College in 2002, Nancy Grimm spoke to the transformative possibilities in the Writing Center as a result of its pedagogy of hope.

² See Patricia Lambert Stock's "Reforming Education in the Land-Grant University: Contributions from a Writing Center" in *The Writing Center Journal*, 18.1 (1998): 7-30.

³ See *All Deliberate Speed: Reflections on the First Half-Century of Brown v. Board of Education*, by Charles J. Ogletree, Jr. Chapter 16 of this book describes in great demographic detail the resegregation taking place in Boston and throughout the country. See also work by Gary Orfield, Chungmei Lee, and others at the Harvard Civil Rights Project for even more chilling demographic data pointing out the resegregation movement in Boston and in our country.

⁴ Eric J. Cooper provided several of these observations in his keynote address for the *Life After Brown Conference* at Eastern Connecticut State University.

⁵ Cooper provided several of these observations as well in his keynote address for the *Life After Brown Conference*.

⁶ I made this argument in "And Justice for All: Aligning the Goals of the Academy and *Brown v. the Board of Education*, 2.1 (2006).

⁷ Ibarra would applaud a high-context move by Rebecca Taylor from Gustavus Adolphus College. Taylor is writing about the results of having her College's Writing Center tutors work in her College's Diversity Center. The data show how the collaboration is helping the College to confront racism.

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