Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center: Stories and Lessons from Two Beginners

Nancy Barron

Nancy Grimm

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1505

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center: Stories and Lessons from Two Beginners

Nancy Barron and Nancy Grimm

Narrative provides a way to speak things otherwise unspeakable, to give voice to that which would otherwise go unheard.

(Briggs and Woolbright xi)

The academic essay, even the collaborative academic essay, is generally written in a single voice. Although we share the same first name and the same theoretical commitments, we do not share similar histories and perspectives. One of us is Mexican-American (or Chicana or Latina), a new assistant professor with many years of experience being a student of color in Anglo institutions (Nancy Barron), and one of us is white (or Anglo or Caucasian), of Irish/Lithuanian heritage, a long-time writing center director from a working-class background (Nancy Grimm). Although our shared commitments as literacy educators allow us to sometimes use we to signify our unity in purpose, we also employ our individual I’s to mark our different racial, generational, and cultural perspectives. The work we discuss in this article would not have been possible if we shared the same voice and history. In foregrounding our differences as well as our mutual vision, we create a sometimes bumpy ride for the reader, interfering with modernist expectations of coherence, yet exposing the seams we think our readers need to see in order to understand how the fabrics of our personal and professional lives connected. We move as well between narrative and exposition, between practice and theory, in order to “give voice to that which would otherwise go unheard.”

A Story to Begin, Nancy Barron

During an unexpected free moment in the Writing Center, another writing coach, a young African-American woman, wanted to discuss her response to an assignment with me. I remember the topic had something to do with color,
class, and societal conflict. I listened as she gave a quick summary of the class readings and then a more careful analysis from her own position as a black young woman with a middle-class upbringing. Because of my own experience as a student and teacher of color, I asked a few questions along the way. I was curious to know when she saw her analysis specific to her own experience and when she felt the conflicts she described as issues of color for a larger community. She paused, thought quickly, and emphasized, “Now that’s something I would’ve done, but that’s not all black people.”

Throughout her ten- to fifteen-minute explanation, she revealed her conscious attempts of placing herself among a larger community. Her earlier controlled demeanor changed to excitement as she articulated her arguments faster and without hesitation to a point where she half-jokingly made statements about student race-relations at the university. She reminded me of Cornel West in her preacher-style explanation and of an independent confident young person with an ease of language and comfort in sharing her ideas. Her discussion came to an end with an “and that’s that” head-nodding conclusion. We both laughed at her very physical conclusion of her lengthy and punctuated response to an assignment designed to prompt such thinking. Here was a student willing to make connections and conclusions on a topic hardly discussed openly. I commented to the writing coach, “Well. Just type up what you just told me and you’re done.” I started to ask how the topic was connected with the rest of the course when the writing coach responded quickly and sharply, “Yeah right. I’m going to write all of that for the assignment.”

I asked why not, and she let me know she was the only black student in the classroom. I thought aloud, trying to think of any way she could bring up some of her key correlations with the texts and her perspective that I had heard only minutes before. But her experience came through once again when she said that even if she submitted an anonymous entry to the class electronic discussion list, the anonymity wouldn’t last very long. She asked, “How many white kids would even consider what I just said? It would be so obvious who said what.”

I fell silent. My head raced to the past, to the present, looking for any familiar instances in my own experience that would help me create an alternative to her decision. I think my silence and looking away prompted pity from the writing coach who was well aware of my own studies about racial legacies in higher education. She let me know, as she may to her mother, that in fact she was learning, and, like all of her other assignments, she thought about their implications. But, she added, for her to sit down and write “like a black person” in a class where she was the only black student, she smiled, looked away, and shook her head, “No.”
One way to think about the writing coach's decision not to participate is to consider her present student position. She knows she's an involuntary minority (a concept John Ogbu uses to distinguish between voluntary immigrants to this country and those who are here due to slavery or conquest), she knows she's black, and she's had experience being alone in academic discussions. But her situation isn't an issue of standing alone. To stand alone on an issue of color when you are the colored is also to possibly sever ties, to insult, to ostracize oneself, not only in the classroom, but also in all aspects of campus life. Educator Laurel Johnson Black reminds us that before students of color come to college, "twelve years of preparation" separate children into those who may speak and those who ultimately may not—and sometimes cannot" (Black 111). There is no question that this writing coach could speak. She was articulate, a thinker, and managed her undergraduate schooling where black students make up 1.5% of the student body. She had a history of attending schools with "Caucasians," as she called her Anglo classmates. She learned how African Americans were heard among Anglo students, and maintained a pretty good grasp for which topics were sensitive, controversial, and potentially risky for her to take on.

What struck me then and now is how insightful the writing coach was. She had study habits, homework practice, on her side. She connected her experience with the assignment. She expanded the topic by offering a response that included her studies and her personal experiences. She clearly had something to say. The assignment invited this sort of response, as good assignments should. Yet, her instructor was not to know of her analysis or close reading of the text. A great loss not only for the instructor, but also for the other non-black students in class.

Most students of color know they represent a larger group of color regardless of their economic class, or experiences with the assignments. Whether her ideas were articulated face to face, or written in electronic entries, in the end she'd be the black person taking a side, not offering a perspective like the other Anglo students. I understood her decision, but I found myself wondering when and how does nonmainstream thinking, like this student's, get to the place where others can learn from and question, thereby giving her a chance to rethink her central concepts. I was bothered about our session for a few terms afterwards, and finally I saw that the ideas, the connections, the conclusions the writing coach discussed on that day in fact were heard, were listened to, were questioned, by a writing coach in the Writing Center. The student had taken a risk with a non-African American. She shared her position as a black young woman to someone not in the same position. She tested her ideas, listened and responded to questions. She, as she told me, learned. Did I? I'd like to think so,
but I got caught up trying to find openings in the "color wall" that keeps most people on "their" side.

Two terms after this spur-of-the-moment conversation, she officially signed up for a regular weekly appointment with me to work on course assignments for a rhetoric course. During our sessions, she almost always raised her position as a black woman as she learned to interpret speeches, talks, and articles by analyzing rhetorical moves. I found myself rethinking how I was listening. When should I encourage her to write from the risky position of color? What would her writing gain? What would the topic gain? What happens to her thinking and main ideas when she chooses not to? I wished her instructor could hear the amount of analytical thinking the student did taking on the assignment and readings. Her writing, unfortunately, yet typically for most involuntary minorities I've worked with, showed less than half of what I had heard during our sessions. The rest of her thinking became the invisible foundation buried under her "white prose," as we later called her writing. Black describes what motivates such decisions:

Rather than "slip" and begin speaking in a way that is comfortable and familiar, rather than further set themselves apart as "other," one strategy is to respond minimally. In doing so, the student can focus on what the teacher is saying—it's a wise learning strategy. But in not responding as "fully" as the teacher may expect, the student is also not doing all those things that teachers are looking for: engaging themselves with the material (and the teacher!); demonstrating by repeating back to the teacher that they have been listening and understand this new information; indicating a willingness to develop the writing using their own ideas. It is a double bind. (108)

I now ask myself what practices keep students like her knowing when they can and cannot contribute their perspectives? I knew that this student's ability to split off aspects of her identity was connected to her need to present a unified self in her papers. To suggest that she represent both worlds was to risk sliding into incoherence. Successful students present themselves as unified with the instructor's views. But because her story makes its way into mine and because my story makes its way into print, her story begins to make its ripples, to disturb the sense that we are doing all we can, that students like her are simply resistant to suggestion.

From experiences like the one shared in this story, we know that many students of color have developed strategies for managing academically on a campus that pretends to be colorblind.
Colorblindness is a way of avoiding the mess of racial history by pretending that racial differences don’t exist. Students of color are supposed to write as though their color didn’t matter. Students like the one in our story learn to disguise their lived experiences and the way their interpretations have been formed by their experiences. A writing coach’s attempts to get such a student to say more, to develop her ideas, to include more detail are likely to be frustrated. Students like the one in this story may challenge our good intentions by clearly expecting us to comment only on their sentence structure and organization. They may ask a writing coach to help them find the “right” phrases, but the writing coach, unaware of his or her participation in the colorblind pretense, may wonder what they mean by “right” phrase. The student in the story has good reason to disregard efforts to encourage her to include more of her thinking. Her experience has taught her that if she needs a writing center at all, it’s to help her write “white.”

We suspect that many writing center workers have encountered students from diverse cultures who have implicitly been expected to engage in literacy in ways that deny their differences. Bilingual students are supposed to write as though English were their only language. Bidialectical students are not supposed to use their “nonstandard” dialect in school. Bicultural students are supposed to interpret what they read from the perspective of mainstream culture. Writing centers might be the best place on campus to glimpse the extent to which difference really matters in writing, yet too often the writing center is the place where acculturation is supposed to occur, a place where students are supposed to learn to read and write as if they have no differences. Students who bring differences of color, class, and culture are expected to make themselves over to match the institutionalized image of the typical student, while white middle-class students’ sense of complacency is reinforced by the familiar values and routines of university life.

For some time now, higher education has theoretically endorsed the idea of multiculturalism. Diversity in students, in faculty, in curriculum is generally accepted as a good thing. In practice, however, teachers, tutors, and administrators have struggled with meaningfully instantiating diversity. A commitment to multiculturalism allows institutions to acknowledge the variability of culture and race, yet the dominant culture’s framework continues to guide institutional practices. Generally, writing center workers are at a loss to convince diverse students that their differences are indeed valued. Like it or not, many writing centers would agree with what Stephen North observed in 1984: “We cannot change [the] context [in which the writer is trying to operate]: all we can do is help the writer learn how to
operate in it and other contexts like it” (441).

Lately, some writing center scholars have been pushing against the real and imagined limitations on the writing center’s ability to affect the context within which students write (Bawarshi and Pelkowski, 1999; Grimm, 1999; Condon and Condon, 2000). With these scholars, we take diversity arguments seriously, but we have found that it’s far easier to theorize about diversity in a scholarly article or conference paper than to meaningfully instantiate productive diversity in a writing center program. In this article, we want to share the short version what happened in one Writing Center when we started moving from theoretical ideals to actual changes in the training program for Writing Center coaches (tutors). We take the term productive diversity from literacy scholars Kalantzis and Cope who articulate a new vision of literacy education, one that moves beyond superficial multiculturalism and into a deeper understanding of pluralism. Kalantzis and Cope are members of The New London Group (an international group of literacy scholars). The New London Group argues that moving beyond token forms of multiculturalism means leaving behind forms of pedagogy that involve “overwriting existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture” (The New London Group 18). Instead, they argue for productive diversity which “means that the mainstream—be that the culture of the dominant group or institutional structures such as education—is itself transformed.” (Kalantzis and Cope 124). Knowing that institutional structures resist change, we looked for a way to begin transforming the practice of the Writing Center where we work. Like most writing centers, our program is strongly influenced by the mainstream values of the institutional structure. Most of the assignments that students bring to the Writing Center expect them to demonstrate the dominant group’s values and practices, and most of the undergraduate and graduate writing coaches who work in our Writing Center take these expectations for granted.

In looking for a place to begin nibbling away at the structures and expectations that prevent change, we knew that we wanted the Writing Center itself to become a place where interactions like the one in our opening story occur more frequently. We believe that the personal transformations that occur in the Writing Center will eventually lead to larger social changes. Few Writing Center employees chose tutoring as their life work. Most of them graduate and go on to become corporate employees, business owners, members of the armed forces, and faculty members. They take the Writing Center experience with them into these contexts. The student in the story we began with harbors no illusions about the context she currently operates within, and we harbor no illusions that we can transform that
context before she graduates. But we wanted to begin a process that would begin to ripple through that context. With The New London Group, we believe that we "we can instantiate a vision through pedagogy that creates in microcosm a transformed set of relationships and possibilities" (19).

Like most writing centers, we already appeared to address diversity in our tutor training. We focused on how to work productively with the many international students who use our Writing Center. Our training also included information about working with students who have learning disabilities. We regularly worked through the Myers/Briggs Personality Inventory so that we could understand the potential for personality differences to undermine Writing Center relationships. The aspect of diversity that was missing from our training program was also the one most shied away from in our professional literature and conferences—racial diversity. The Writing Center Resource Manual, published by the NWCA Press, and most tutor-training books contain no mention of race as a factor that affects literate activity. Yet, in our bookcases, these writing center books sit right next to books by literacy theorists such as Shirley Brice Heath, James Gee, Brian Street, and Mike Rose, all of whom provide evidence of the profound ways that social legacies affect our literacy practices and our worldview. From our Writing Center experience, we know that differences in identity and lived experiences, far more than differences in style or grammar, can undermine the best of communicative intentions. In America, race has a powerful influence on perspective and experience.

In identifying race as our focus in our revised approach to training, we understand it to be a social construct rather than a biological or genetic fact. We also understand race in the twenty-first century as a much more complex topic than the historical binary construction of black and white. But while we understand racial identity as far more fluid than it may have been fifty years ago, our experience with this project confirms three precepts proposed by race theorists Omi and Winant: "1. Old-fashioned racism still exists; 2. The traditional victimology of racism is moribund; and 3. To oppose racism one must remain conscious of race" (157).

In the remainder of this article, we reflect on our experience of moving in one Writing Center from a theoretical commitment to productive diversity to actual social change. While we cannot provide a neat five-step process for others to follow, we will structure our discussion around four of the lessons we learned from this experience. In deliberately trying to address race in our training over the last six years, the biggest challenge was accepting that we were a lot further from the goal of productive diversity than we imagined. The personal transformations that productive diversity calls
for do not happen easily, nor do they occur by reading a book. Addressing race in a writing center program is not a one-time event, but a continual process, one that we remain engaged in today.

**Lesson 1: Expect the unexpected.**

We wish we could recommend a particularly effective starting place for focusing attention on the ways that race affects literacy practices, but all we can do is describe where we began and why. We started making changes in an unusual year when the turnover in our staff was minimal. Most of our graduate and undergraduate students had already had one year of work experience and orientation to the theories that inform our practices. That particular year, we happened to have three students of color on the staff, remarkable because students of color (Native American, African American, and Latino) represent only 3.6 percent of the total enrollment at our university. The experience of the staff and the advantage of having students of color on the staff cleared away typical excuses for not introducing something new in training—too much to do with a new staff, too high of a turnover, too far from the "real" focus of Writing Center work.

Knowing we had an experienced staff (at least in writing center terms), we decided to focus some of our weekly writing center meetings on revisionist accounts of US history. At the beginning of the year, we presented three texts to the staff members: Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror*, James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, and Joel Spring's *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*. To us, history offers the best explanation for the ways relationships are structured today. We believe many of these untold histories live in the memory of our students' teachers, parents, and grandparents. At the time, we assumed that exposure to this revisionist history in Writing Center training would show our Writing Center coaches how much color (and class) still affects opportunity structures in spite of the American belief in equality of opportunity. We hoped that these histories would sensitize our white middle-class coaches to the different experiences and memories that students of color bring to literacy education. We hoped that as a result of reading these histories, they might question some of the faulty assumptions that structure race relations on campus and begin to enter conversations that explored real differences. We hoped that the readings would expose (and began to fill) some gaps in their education. We hoped the historical perspective would make them more cautious about the assumptions they brought to tutoring sessions when working with students of color and more careful about clarifying the positions from which they entered these conversations.
We approached the texts as we have many other texts we bring to tutor training. We asked the writing coaches to pair up, choose a chapter, offer a summary of that chapter, and attempt to make connections to writing center practice. Initially, our concern was for the two African-American undergraduate coaches. Would they be put on the spot as we discussed issues of color? Would they feel pushed to become the spokesperson for “their people”? How could we call attention to issues of color without making them living specimens during the meetings?

Our concerns were misplaced. What we were unprepared for was the outburst among the mainstream members of the group. Their responses weren’t necessarily spiteful (though, on occasion, maybe some were more than spiteful), but mostly they reacted in defense of their schooling, their knowledge, their identities. They became defensive at the idea of systemic domination and injustice. Many covered their uncomfortable views through denial. How could it be, the more confident and extroverted of the group asked, that their understandings were of privilege? How could they all be lumped together as a group known as white? One coach questioned, “Who is Takaki (author of one of the texts) anyway?” and another reminded us flatly, “Yeah, anyone can have a book published.” Attempts to connect any of the readings to current practice were also stonewalled. Coaches questioned the relevance of the revisionist perspective for education today. In their minds, these histories didn’t matter in post-civil rights time. There were no longer laws that kept students of color outside the university. As students, they considered themselves equal. Most of the coaches were youthful, and most of them behaved as though they had been exposed to something fearful, something that made them feel vulnerable. When we asked why this history had not been a part of their education, they countered that such history would frighten school children. They questioned the wisdom of exposing children to information for which they were not responsible. They argued that if in fact this revisionist history were true, then the history books would be too big, and there would be too much to cram into a course.

While we were caught in this unexpected whirlwind, we discovered an invaluable article by Beverly Tatum, called “Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom.” In Tatum’s work, we found explanations for the reactions we were encountering, and we recommend this article to anyone undertaking a similar project. Tatum sees racial issues as emotional as well as intellectual. She warns that if these emotional responses are not addressed, they “can result in student resis-
ittance to oppression-related content areas" (Tatum 2). She points out that "such resistance can ultimately interfere with the cognitive understanding and mastery of the material" (Tatum 2). Tatum presents racial identity development theories that helped us understand the various reactions we encountered. Reading Tatum also assured us that everyone would grow with increased exposure and experience with people outside their own group. (Just recently, we also discovered Helen Fox’s new book *When Race Breaks Out*, another invaluable resource.)

Tatum helped us make sense of the uncharted territory. Reading her reminded us that many of the undergraduates were encountering challenges to their belief systems for the first time. Beliefs about colorblindness, equality of opportunity, and individual effort seep into education from the earliest grades, reinforcing one another and keeping the lid on Pandora’s Box. These beliefs keep white Americans comfortable, and they protect white Americans from accepting responsibility for honest dialogue about racial differences. Raising questions about race in tutor training means opening the Box. We learned to accept that the nice undergraduates on our staff, the ones we carefully screened and hired, would use these beliefs to defend themselves against the discomfort of dialogue about race. We learned that under the inevitable stress created by change, we can revert to familiar beliefs ourselves. We learned that if writing center training does not directly engage these beliefs, they are strong enough to undermine the best of intentions.

Rather than rush through the process or shut it down, we decided to move more slowly, finding time for individual conversations and inviting coaches to join us on a conference proposal reflecting on the experience. Many responded, and the process of writing the proposals and papers proved invaluable for reflecting on the highly charged experience. Through this process, we developed a more fine-grained understanding of the responses that initially confused us. For example, we discovered that one of the white coaches who seemed bored by the topic was from a multiracial family and had participated for several years in one of the few interracial campus groups, the gospel choir. Initially we had interpreted her boredom as a cover for discomfort when in fact she was, because of her greater contact with racial differences, at a different stage in identity development than many of the other white students. We also learned that another coach whose name and appearance suggested Latino heritage had been raised by his Polish mother. Learning that he knew little about his father’s family helped us understand his discomfort with the discussions.

Nancy Grimm: Engaging in this process with our coaches taught me that I, too, was unprepared to enter conversations about racial
diversity. Helen Fox writes, "How is it that whites have no stories about how learning about race has affected our engagement with our students, our understanding of our material, our values and beliefs, our soul? Why are bookstores full of stories about the ways people of color have been affected by race relations yet carry nothing, or nearly nothing, about the experiences of whites?" (16) Fox recommends beginning our conversations about race by starting with our own stories about race. Reading Fox's advice makes me uncomfortably aware of the privileges I assumed when I instigated this project and the unacceptable interpretations I made of many of the coaches' responses. Although at this point I cannot recommend a particularly apt time or method for introducing race as a topic for writing center training, this experience has taught me how important it is to start with my own stories rather than assume that the histories written by and about Others will do the job for me. Following Fox's advice is a dose of humble pie. I realized I began learning about race as a college student/waitress in restaurant kitchens where Black and Latino workers prepared the food I carried and served to the front white (although not "segregated") part of the establishment. And I began interacting socially with the kitchen workers for the same sort of adolescent reasons I started smoking—because they were fun, and this experience was cool, risky, different, and therefore exciting. I quit smoking and learned to think about, rather than exoticize, racial difference much later in life.

Lesson 2: Find a buddy with similar commitments whom you can trust with your naivete.

At the time of our work on this project, one of us (Nancy Barron) worked as a graduate student writing coach. This institutional placement combined with being a person of color offered access to conversations and relationships where some of the racial tensions were circulating and where some of the changes were occurring. Neither of us had experience initiating this sort of project, but because we shared a similar vision of literacy education and also valued our differences in perspective, we began turning to one another for motivation and insight. Because this project troubled workplace interactions, we needed a buddy whom we trusted to sort out our interpretations and decisions.

Nancy Barron: One advantage to being a person of color is that I'm allowed to not only knock but often I am let into the entry way of other students of color. The rest is up to me. Once I'm allowed to ask questions and to listen, I have to work hard to maintain my welcome,
to sense when I should leave. Some Anglos may think people of color have it easy with other people of color. If this were true, we'd be a mighty force and some insecure person's nightmare. My calling card is just that. I'm allowed to call, but I'm not guaranteed a conversation. I have to earn their trust. At the same time, some people of color often seem to believe that there isn't much point trying to work with Anglos. I know I've heard many times, "Anglos don't listen." "They've already made up their minds." "They think they know everything." Sure, I've met Anglos who fit these descriptions, and it's problematic to simply say I've met people of color who fit these descriptions as well. However, to say as a statement, "Anglos' or 'Whites' don't listen," is to say my experience with Nancy Grimm never happened. When I look back at our work, I realize my desire to work with others was put to the test. Was I patient enough? Was I expecting Nancy Grimm to understand my experience even though I didn't understand hers? If it's true that Anglos think they know everything, then I've lived a dream. In my dream I've met and worked with individuals who were as tangled up in our U.S. history as I am. If we are going to make change—positive encompassing change—we must work together in the face of the system, not because of it.

Nancy Grimm: My work with Nancy Barron provided the motivation as well as the guidance to continue with this project. Without her insights, suggestions, and stories of her experiences, I would have given up at an early stage. As a Writing Center director, one of my responsibilities is to maintain motivation and a collective sense of purpose among staff members. There were moments throughout this project when it was clear that our discussions about race were creating divisions as well as confusion. It was so much easier to maintain the status quo, to hire students who were most like me, to train them to enact a monolingual, monocultural writing center pedagogy. Nancy Barron's stories and cajoling helped me to maintain perspective and to think structurally about what was happening rather than take the conflicts personally. She reminded me to understand the coaches' responses historically, to remember that most of them were born long after Martin Luther King's time. Even with her guidance, there were moments of discouraging clarity when I understood better than before all the forces that keep us out of this uncharted territory.

One thing our collaboration taught us was to pay attention to the many ways we are not the "same." If these differences are not addressed, then the conflicting assumptions that guide our behaviors can undermine the trust needed for honest collaboration. Even in the one institutional inheritance we ostensibly shared—the same religious faith—we learned how
strongly our racial heritages contributed to different understandings of the traditions and tenets of that faith.

Although we share similar scholarly interests, our collaboration is also sustained by friendship, by meals shared together, by experiences with one another’s families. The regularity and depth of these exchanges has created trust, the foundation for any sort of transformation. Productive diversity will not come about as easily among people who share only a workplace in common. Our collaboration may be an example of the transformative potential of productive diversity, but we caution that the transformations in our individual perspectives did not happen “naturally.” We learned to ask honest, hard questions of one another, and we learned to listen carefully and openly to the response. “What were you thinking?” “Why did you say that?” “Can you unpack this for me?” Gradually, we each gained a more developed sense of how race contributes to the frames we used to understand Others.

Nancy Grimm: Answering the questions Nancy Barron asked me meant letting go of an initial bristle of anger sparked by childhood memories of the “What do you think you’re doing?” questions often posed (sometimes only implied) by adults responding to my trespassing against invisible class boundaries. It meant letting go of the protected hierarchy provided by hard-won academic credentials. It meant remembering the times as a student when I wanted to ask similar questions but didn’t because it was safer to remain invisible, guessing at the answers. It meant the hard work of unpacking the assumptions and intentions and expectations that now formed my interactions at school. It meant the exhilaration of discovering that, yes, this was it all along. This is what made the journey long and hard, the always wondering what they were thinking, who taught them that, how they knew they were right so much of the time. It confirmed the appeal of Writing Center work, the way I could sometimes anticipate the questions that were in a student’s head because I, too, had had those questions once. It meant the difficult work of making the tacit explicit. Above all, it created the satisfying achievement of a richer perspective on how school and literacy work.

Lesson 3: Be clear for yourself about what is motivating the focus on race.

From the beginning of our project, we shared a commitment to understanding more about the ways that diversity affects literacy education,
we were both committed to a vision of education that involved more than acculturation. Although we knew we each shared this commitment, we did not do enough to share it with the staff. Instead, we started making changes without clarifying adequately enough why we were making changes and what vision of the future we held. The undergraduates on our staff are both practical and intelligent, and they quickly recognized that we had made a shift and were moving in an unfamiliar direction. They began to put the brakes on, and we (again assuming they shared our unarticulated commitments) were frustrated by their resistance. We came slowly to recognize that we needed to be clear about the vision of learning we held. Together, we imagine a writing center as a place where people can come together across their differences to share interpretations inevitably informed by racial, class, social, and cultural identities, where in learning about difference, our own perspectives become transformed, and thus we begin to communicate, to solve problems, to teach, and to coexist more fully. However, even if the entire staff of a writing center subscribed to this vision, there are many reasons why they would not consider race as a confounding issue. Because writing center theory encourages us to think in terms of individuals rather than systems, because Americans believe that literacy education is the road to equity, because liberal ideology encounters racism by pretending that color makes no difference, because we are living in the post-Civil Rights era, it is easier to believe that race doesn’t affect what we do in writing centers or that writing centers can’t affect the work that racism does.

Nancy Grimm: As the Writing Center director, I should have worked harder to clarify why we were taking this new direction in tutor training. Instead, I mistakenly assumed that the staff would readily align themselves with this desire to make the Writing Center a place where more conversations like the one in our opening story would take place. I was able to theorize about diversity, to make intellectual arguments for an ideological model of literacy (Street), but I didn’t work hard enough on making arguments that made sense to mainstream undergraduates who as writing coaches were already carrying more responsibility for literacy education than many faculty do. What’s more, most of these undergraduates were engineering and science majors, accustomed to thinking in practical rather than theoretical terms. In retrospect, I credit their challenges and resistance with forcing me to clarify the ways that race (and all diversity) intersects with literacy. I can’t say I’ve finished this process of clarification, but I have learned how important it is to distinguish between individual acts of racism
and structural racism. Rather than lead undergraduate coaches to believe I am holding them individually responsible for racism, I need to show how the Writing Center is implicated in institutional structures that remain oppressive to students of color. Equally important, I need to show the mainstream students how a commitment to productive diversity can benefit them.

It is difficult for those of us who are white to see the invisible social structures and assumptions that impede productive engagements with difference. Yet, at mainstream institutions, students of color rarely find their cultural beliefs represented in the curriculum and even more rarely do they find spaces where their primary literacy practices can be accepted as significant communicative acts. If they want to provide performances that earn good grades, they develop coping mechanisms that do not include making effective use of the writing center, at least not the writing center as most mainstream practitioners think of it. Members of the dominant group have difficulty conceptualizing systematic oppression because it lies outside of their lived experience. If we were starting over again, we would distinguish between systematic oppression and individual acts of racism. Political theorist Iris Marion Young helps us make it clear that structural oppression occurs when “the oppressed group’s own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life” (Young, Justice 60).

According to Young, oppression is “embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and collective consequences of following those rules” (41). Oppression in a structural sense has more to do with “often unconscious assumption and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short the normal processes of everyday life” (41). Oppression, then, doesn’t need a military. Structural oppression is continuous and embedded in basic transactions and opinion. Young says the “systemic character of oppression implies that an oppressed group need not have a correlate oppressing group” (41). People just doing their jobs, without reflecting about how they currently and potentially affect the system, end up perpetuating oppression because they “do not understand themselves as agents of oppression” (42). Young concludes, “for every oppressed group there is a group who is privileged in relation to that group” (42). Young explains how, “[o]ften without noticing,” the dominant groups “project their own experience as representative of humanity as such” (59).
Nancy Barron: Initially, this idea was very difficult for me to comprehend because I tried to understand it as an oppressed individual might. But, the more I considered how much I unconsciously will my Anglo friends to be more like me, to be more Mexican when it comes to issues of death, to be more Latino when it comes to closeness and physical boundaries, I know, I, too, project my sense of humanity onto individuals from very different worldviews. The difference is that I'm surrounded by responses, by behaviors, by words and actions that remind me I'm not in the majority.

Young also makes it explicit that in matters of race, "The stereotypes confine [students of color] to a nature which often is attached in some ways to their bodies," so it isn't that a person of color says the wrong things but rather what that person looks like that will maintain the stereotype. Young also says, "Those living under cultural imperialism" are defined "from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they experience" from elsewhere, from people "with whom they do not identify and who do no identify with them" (59).

Nancy Barron: In a Latino community, my university colleagues looked like the oppressors, the ones who never listened but always knew what was right for everyone. At the same time, these colleagues persistently assumed everyone saw them as individuals, and not connected to a larger group.

In addition to Young, we found Patricia Williams helped us to explain to the staff the insidious effects of colorblindness—the habit of pretending not to notice color because it "doesn't (or shouldn't) matter." Patricia Williams tells a story about her nursery-school-aged son who responded to his teachers' queries about the color of trees, grass, sky with the comment, "It makes no difference." His teachers advised Williams to take him to have his eyes tested. When the expert pronounced his vision sound, Williams began to analyze her son's "problem" differently. She realized that he had heard his teachers admonish his classmates who were fighting about whether a black person could be the good guy in the playground games. "It doesn't matter whether you're black or white or red or green or blue," they insisted. Her son must have concluded that if his color didn't matter (in spite of his painful experience on the playground), then neither did the color of the sky, the clouds, or the flowers. Williams writes,

My son's anxious response was redefined by his teachers as physical deficiency. This anxiety redefined as deficiency suggests to me that it may be illustrative of the way in which the liberal ideal of color-blindness is too often confounded. That is to say, the very
notion of blindness about color constitutes an ideological confusion at best, and denial at its very worst. I recognize, certainly, that the teachers were inspired by a desire to make whole a division in the ranks. But much is overlooked in the move to undo that which clearly and unfortunately matters just by labeling it that which “makes no difference”; the dismissiveness, however unintentional, leaves those in my son’s position pulled between the clarity of their own experience and the often alienating terms in which they must seek social acceptance. (4)

The poignant story Williams tells about her son shows the way that well-intentioned white Americans avoid the harsh reality that color still makes a difference in post-civil rights times, and it also shows the effect of the avoidance on a student of color whose confusion is then cast as deficit.

Nancy Grimm: I will never forget one of the first times we discussed the fallacies of colorblindness around a Writing Center table. One African-American student told about how when he walked across the campus at dusk, from the library to the residence hall, white women would quickly cross to the other side of the street—the side without a sidewalk. As we listened, another young African-American man who sat next to me sadly nodded his head, and he trembled as though his body were racked by fever. Although I didn’t look over at him, I felt his trembling and thought about how I knew him as a responsible, warm, bright student, one who had worked for several years in the Writing Center. Outside the Writing Center, particularly at dusk, his color mattered far more than his character. Since that time, another African-American writing coach has told about how he regularly hears car door locks click when he walks through town. These stories, written as they are on their bodies of young men I care for, illustrate how painfully false the notion of colorblindness is.

Writing center coaches need both the theoretical and narrative-based arguments for addressing race, but perhaps most important is convincing them of the value that expanded communicative repertoire will have for them. Moves toward diversity in the writing center need to be rooted in a sense that the mainstream has something to gain from leaving colorblindness behind. Again, we turn to The New London Group who insist that the existing “formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed” project of literacy pedagogy will not hold up to today’s challenges (9). Their proposed pedagogy involves a new conception of students, one that imagines them as “as active designers—makers—of social futures” (7).
If race is to be a topic in writing center training, the undertaking has more hope of succeeding if student coaches are invited into the project as designers rather than as recipients of an imposed diversity experience. To move beyond the belief that racism is a thing of the past, but also to gain from the significant progress toward racial democracy that has been achieved since the 1950s, we need to invite students into productive exchanges about issues of color in order that they might decide how to achieve a broader communicative repertoire. We find this vision reinforced in Kalantzis and Cope who clarify that learning need not be a matter of “development” in which the old self is left behind (as from a homely caterpillar to a beautiful moth), but rather a matter of expanding repertoire, “starting with a recognition of lifeworld experience and using that experience as a basis for extending what one knows and what one can do” (124). Because so many writing center administrators are white, because the professional organization is predominantly white, most of our programmatic and professional decisions have been based on assumptions informed by white experience that has rarely been challenged. To change this status quo, students who work in writing centers need to understand their role as designers of a new world.

**Lesson 4: Address the extent to which relationships with self, family, friends, and institutions are structured by racial beliefs and assumptions.**

We didn’t realize until we were in the middle of this project the extent to which we were not only challenging the self-complacency of individuals but also threatening individuals’ relationships with family, friends, and institutions. This was far more than an academic project. Provoking the kind of transformation called for by productive diversity in a tutor training program involves tinkering with something as fundamental as people’s identities and the ways these identities have been formed in relationship with others. Personally held beliefs about race, whether they are articulated or not, are connected with one’s relationship with parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, extended family, former teachers, schools, churches, places of employment. We did not understand when we began how much was at stake, yet we learned that if change was going to occur, we needed to offer new ways of conceptualizing these relationships. We also needed to pay attention to the relationships among staff members rather than look at what happened between the staff and the students who used the Writing Center. Most importantly, we needed to replace the familiar understandings that were being threatened with new understandings. If we could not suggest ways to restructure belief systems
and renegotiate relationships, then our effort would unravel, and we would end up reinforcing attitudes we are trying to replace.

Theorists such as John Ogbu and Iris Marion Young (again) helped us think about how to renegotiate beliefs about race within relationships. Ogbu helps us make the useful distinction between voluntary and involuntary minorities, clarifying that the large group of voluntary minorities (which often include the immediate family and ancestors of many of the undergraduate coaches) were willing to give up languages and identities in order to “become” American, believing that their sacrifices would benefit succeeding generations. An important difference is that the voluntary minority chooses to come to the U.S. by immigration. As a result, they have a homeland to compare their U.S. experiences with, and they see discriminatory practices as temporary (368). Voluntary minorities believe in education and they tend to push their children to better themselves since they have the opportunity to take full advantage of the U.S. educational system.

The involuntary minority, on the other hand, is part of the U.S. experience because of conquest or colonization. Ogbu’s groups of involuntary minorities include the Native Americans who were colonized, African Americans who were brought as slaves, and the Mexican Americans who were incorporated after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. These three groups do not have the same identification with the dominant American culture; they tend to compare themselves against the Anglo mainstream. In general, they do not believe discriminatory practices are temporary because the glass ceilings and limited opportunities are evident throughout generations and in their communities. And, as Ogbu says, “they see no justifiable reason for their inferior education—except discrimination” (375).

According to Ogbu, sometimes schooling is perceived as “a linear acculturation, [where] involuntary minority students feel that they have to choose between academic success and maintaining their minority identity and cultural frame of reference” (378). It is important that those of us with a family history of voluntary immigration be able to understand and explain this significant difference when objections are raised by family or friends. Additionally, it is important for understanding the literacy choices that involuntary minorities face in a writing center. For some students, it’s great to get individual attention; for others that individual attention can seem like an interrogation or even dismissal of family belief systems and familiar ways with words.

To provide guidance to coaches who have never before been aware of the dangers of projecting their own experiences on to others, we again turned to a point made by Young. In an essay entitled “Asymmetrical Reci-
procity,” Young argues that when people try to put themselves in another’s position, they inevitably put themselves in the other’s position. This is particularly problematic in matters of race. Young says, “When privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the other’s situation” (Intersecting 48). We find it helpful to share Young’s caution as well as her recommendation that we approach communication across differences with a stance of wonder. According to Young, “a respectful stance of wonder toward other people is one of openness across, awaiting new insight about their needs, interests, perceptions or values. Wonder also means being able to see one’s own position, assumptions, perspective as strange, because it has been put in relation to theirs” (56). Young’s insistence on recognizing the asymmetry in positions is a useful corrective to an over-emphasis on the peerness of relationships in the writing center. Young emphasizes that the value of assuming asymmetry is that people enlarge their thinking in two ways: (a) their own thinking becomes relativized, and (b) they develop an enlarged understanding of the world, one that is unavailable given the limits of our own perspectives. Recognizing these gains is important, given that confrontation with difference can be unsettling and disruptive.

Nancy Grimm: While I was often discouraged and conflicted about this undertaking, I learned through it that racial encounters were occurring every day in the Writing Center, too often in unproductive ways. I learned to pay more attention to the ways Writing Center experiences were affecting the students of color on the staff, and my newly developed awareness has made it impossible to go back to pretending that race doesn’t matter. I learned to look for small instances of change rather than institutional change. I learned that as a visible campus representative of academic literacy, my words, my presence, my responses matter to students of color, just as much as my silence, my absence, my complicity also matter. Nancy Barron was persistent in teaching me to recognize that I, too, was a member of a race and a culture, and that my actions and reactions either reinforced or challenged the beliefs that students of color hold about the mainstream. I am encouraged when six years after our beginning, long after the original group of writing coaches has graduated, the undergraduates of color regularly apply to work in the Writing Center. I am encouraged when I see our increasing number of international students working side by side with writing coaches of color. I am encouraged when I hear mainstream coaches respond to cultural inquiries from interna-
tional students by saying "As a white American" rather than representing their experience as universal. I am encouraged when a Native-American writing coach gives the Writing Center a medicine wheel and a map of the US showing Native tribes. I am encouraged when at our predominantly white institution, an African-American walk-in coach reads an essay about how unnecessary affirmative action is, and the mainstream student writer has the lived experience of wondering about how the shape and tone of his argument are affecting his audience. Our Writing Center has become a place where students of color are employees, students who are often bidialectical and bicultural and sometimes bilingual. This signifies to Writing Center users and to faculty in unmistakably visual terms that literacies are always multiple, situated, and ideological.

Productive diversity, the transformation in mainstream practices envisioned by the new literacy scholars, is the sort of goal that needs to be kept visible on the horizon for a long, long time. The old autonomous versions of literacy make it too easy to maintain racial divisions, to hold individuals responsible for long-standing social ills, to separate certain lived experiences from textual representation, to imagine that justice can be achieved by reading a book, to think that we can intellectually rather than experientially challenge structural racism. It is comfortable to retreat to this old programming when the going gets rough. It is equally easy for others to challenge, misinterpret, and weaken efforts to change. The dialectical relationship between a theoretical commitment and transformed practice is central to this effort. Again and again, we returned to theorists for the interpretive frameworks and conceptual understandings to take into practice and to clarify our arguments. Again and again, we question how to practically live our commitments. The balance is fragile. Courtney Cazden turns to the Australian Aboriginal metaphor of *gemma*, literally a place where fresh and salt water meet to nourish richly diverse forms of life, "biologically in the literal situation, culturally and intellectually in the metaphorical" (321). The metaphor reminds us of the unequal power relation: salt water can easily overcome fertile land, while fresh water can do little harm to the ocean. A writing center can be an institutional site where diverse forms of thinking can be encouraged, yet the salt water of mainstream institutional life is always abundantly present and can quickly overwhelm the fresh water. The work of maintaining the fragile balance happens in one relationship at a time.

In spite of our best efforts to address the challenges we encountered, we also learned to accept that sometimes a particular
individual’s identity may be too fragile, and change will not occur when a person feels too vulnerable. Transformation, if it is going to happen at all, will happen in multidirectional ways, in no predictable time frame, and often in spaces beyond the institutional gaze. We believe the writing center provides a space for hope, a place to begin. Our concluding story shows the unpredictability of knowing if or how or where or when these attempts will lead to the kinds of transformations that make dialog across differences possible. One thing we learned for sure was that the more we changed our thinking and interpretations of others’ responses, the better we listened and the more we understood.

A Story to Conclude, Nancy Barron

A number of years ago, an Anglo male writing coach, whom I thought seemed to respect me, got into a rant and became extremely frustrated as he tried to convince me that the Great Lakes’ Indians were only trouble, lived in the past, demanded rights that weren’t theirs. The focus was on Indian fishing rights (he came from generations of Anglo fishermen). Now, it’s important to understand that the student was a third-year undergraduate, a mainstream Anglo, and known for his arrogance. And, I was a graduate student, from the west, so fishing rights were something I had read and heard about, but I had never experienced the clashes before. And, my own undergraduate university provided slightly traumatic memories—janitors printing KKK paraphernalia for their group, a physical assault on campus during the middle of the day against an African-American woman student. I had internalized my own defense, my low expectations of Them, the ones who are always so sure they know much. But I was aware of my weak tendencies, and worked hard to remember he was a kid, a human capable of listening. I tried and still try to untangle the tight construction I have of disrespectful Anglos.

The young face tried to let me know I was okay since the Indians out in the southwest were different. (He saw me connected with Indians because I explained to him once what it meant to be mestizo.) He fit my Anglo stereotype of letting me know he knew who I was. Always so confident and sure they know, always in control. His eyes narrowed as he said authoritatively, rudely and with a clenched mouth, “They [the desert people] don’t cause trouble like the ones up here!” His words, and, worse, his look caused my stomach to turn, my heart became heavy, and my head insisted I say something. I challenged him to take the department’s Ojibwe culture class so that he might learn about fishing rights from an Ojibwe perspective. Before I could finish, he raised his voice to a near shout. His flushed young face transfigured under a
baseball cap with a fishing-lure logo. I heard and felt, “I’d go in there and tell them, “I hate you Indians!” I shut down. I looked down and mentally searched for a song to hum so I couldn’t hear him anymore.

My head sometimes races when my eyes send images that don’t make sense, words that don’t fit the image before me. Had I been younger, in my early twenties, I probably would’ve concluded he was just a white boy. An ignorant son of a racist who’d never change. That’s how they are. Así son los Anglo Sajones. But I was older, so I searched for reasons, for any past memory that might explain what my eyes saw and my ears heard. I didn’t and couldn’t make myself talk to him after I saw and felt his deep anger. Every time I saw him, I averted my eyes. My body did not want his image, and I didn’t have the practice to take on a kid I used to respect. I knew, in my head, his hate was not new. He most likely heard similar conclusions from friends, family, other non-native fishers. But I wasn’t ready, simply wasn’t capable of dealing with the force of his hate. Regardless of what stage he was in, regardless of my own experience working with youthful ignorance, I felt disappointed, discouraged, and disabled.

We became mutually uncomfortable around each other, and although we had plenty of opportunity to talk things out, I couldn’t as well as wouldn’t. I was bruised and absolutely heavy with the image of his disgust toward an entire people. Believe it or not, I once really liked this kid. I liked his cockiness, his arrogance that I wrote off as his youthful immaturity. But I never expected to see such anger that seemed to be generations old. I never expected and couldn’t accept that the intelligent immature kid was capable of crushing me with what I considered his distorted hate. This kid and I weren’t complete strangers. We had entered the stage of conversations where we shared insights of education, of individuals, of jobs, of movies.

He ended up quitting the Writing Center that same year, and I never saw him again anywhere on campus or in the community, which is unusual for a small campus of 6,000 and a small town in the upper peninsula. I thought he left the area. My colleagues and peers would bring up his name and usually shake their heads as they’d recount a memory or two about his behavior. His behavior had been “a problem” but I used to find his shallow thinking honest, not purposefully hurtful. As for his explosion, I was always mixed. In some ways, he was too honest for me. There was a part of me that wanted to remember the kid who hid his hatred from me. The kid who didn’t play games, but let you know how he read an article, an assignment. He’d come to me regularly to complain about an African student. She was too confident, too outspoken for being an international student. She wasn’t humble, happy to be in the U.S. She was too direct, knew what she wanted from
her studies, and challenged him politically, socially, and continuously during their sessions. He was always pink (mostly from frustration) at the end of their sessions, and we always debriefed. I wasn’t sure why he came to me, but I decided he chose to, so I made sure I was honest. My focus was on his reactions. Why did he carry a script for international students to follow? He couldn’t answer except “everyone knows that,” meaning his conclusions were tacit and probably reinforced by media, friends, and family. I’d turn the script around and demand he behave as I would like for him, too. Not a chance. There was my opening to shove the mental mirror in front of him. With the African student, he began to reflect. I could almost hear his soul snap out of its rigid structure—he began to change. And, like most people, I made the mistake of thinking change meant he was now open. He would leave behind his ignorance as if it were a bad habit. I failed to acknowledge I was dealing with a mindset, a philosophy of sorts, a worldview. A heavy and deep worldview.

I believe I’m a lucky person when it comes to issues of color because I’ve been fortunate to see people change with my own eyes. Two-and-a-half years after his rage and my incompetence to battle the results of his rage, I walked into the room where I was to defend my dissertation. Among the group present in the audience was the same kid. He sat off to my right, under a baseball cap with some kind of fishing logo. He came to my dissertation defense on literacy assumptions and involuntary minorities—issues of color that included the local Ojibwe. I saw him, had a memory flash, my stomach began to react, my eyes turned away, my head raced once again. I wondered for a few moments whether he would interrupt my presentation, but he didn’t. He said, as he left in a hurry, “I wanted to see what you had to say.” And I thought I’d never see him again.

A few weeks later, I ran into him at a local tourist spot at one of the most northern points in the peninsula (Brockway Mountain). It’s one of my favorite spots because Lake Superior feels superior, and the land feels rugged. I’m told it’s a good place to catch the northern lights. The hawks and bald eagles soar near there on windy days, so, for me, this place is unique and of its own. On this day, however, there was no wind. No birds. No waves. Superior was humbled as the sunlight shone white on the smooth lake. It was pure chance (or was it?) to see that the same kid whose tight face held a lethal mouth with venomous words now held a nervous smile. We took each other’s hands as a welcome and clearly a relief. He let me know he was traveling with his current job and meeting “all kinds of different people.” My eyes saw what seemed a sincere expression, apologetic almost, and definitely relieved as he told me about his future plans that included working with people from
I retell this story for a few reasons. The first is to point out that I did nothing unusual or extra to work with this kid. In fact, I was overwhelmed during the time I could have said or done something to address my feelings about his words, how he affected me, and so on, but I didn’t. And I was in a position to do so. Everything was set up for me to educate him. But I basically said nothing, hardly made eye contact. In many ways, I did what I ask academics not to do. I advocate for academics to work on letting students know when they disagree with their opinions. It’s very important for involuntary minority students to hear the words from their instructors. Instead, I made the young Anglo kid invisible, something I think involuntary minorities have practice with—especially with Anglo men. So, I know I had nothing to do with his attempts to meet different people, to find courage and attend my dissertation defense knowing he’d be sitting among many people who thought poorly of him. Yet, he came, for whatever reasons. On the mountain, he let me know he wasn’t the same, for whatever reasons. I saw the same kid, a little older, but the same one who still wore fishing insignia on his baseball caps. His outburst, as upsetting as it was, fit a type. He behaved liked mainstream males are expected to. His behavior on the mountain, as awkward yet warm as it was, fit a type I’m unfamiliar with. I believe he’s moved to different stage; he’s changed ever so slightly, but he changed. And for whatever reasons, he’s kept me in mind and made sure I knew he had changed. He may or may never know how much his actions have confused my memories. He’s made me think, reflect, and construct more space for future behaviors like his that I may run into.

My understandings have and hopefully will continue to change. The images I saw in the past, I see in the present, but differently. The colors, the tribes of cultural differences still look the same, but they don’t feel the same. My eyes send similar images to my head, and, clearly, with practice, my head, ears, stomach, and heart filter the same images from the past a little differently. It’s probably important to remember I’m an involuntary minority telling a story about an Anglo male mainstream student. Our roles weren’t typical since I’m the authority, and he, my subordinate. The teacher and the student, the colored and the opaque, the woman and the man, the older and the younger. We took risks. And we both ended up uncomfortable, and I temporarily shut down. And I’d do it again knowing that change hardly comes when we want it to or how we’d like for it be. Risks are important. The Writing Center is set-up to work with students individually. Risks are there, but hidden most of the times. There is no guarantee, no script, no way to control the person in front or the person within exactly as we’d like to. But there is
time to make room, to make spaces for memory. When we recall what we know is possible, then the present isn't always as new, always as surprising. With more practice with diversity, more practice remembering it's not easy, more practice asking what all might be happening that I can't see, maybe, just maybe, we'll arrive at more humane confusion and recognize our dependence on each other.

Notes

1 The Writing Center where we have worked together is located at a technological university in a remote rural area where students of color account for less than four percent of the total student population. Stories from universities and colleges with a greater representation of diversity may be quite different. We hope this article serves as an invitation to share more about how racial diversity is addressed in different writing center contexts.

2 We recognize Sylvia Matthews as an influential partner on the work that led to this article. Sylvia teaches the tutor training course at our Writing Center and was involved in many of the experiences and discussions we write about here.

3 In Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools, readers will find another useful story about the challenges of collaborating across racial differences.

4 This incident became for me a central memory of my first year at university. It was during spring term, 1988. On a sunny Friday afternoon, an Anglo woman and man approached and shoved a young African-American woman student until they knocked her down, saying, "We don't want any of you niggers on this campus." An Asian-American student saw and heard what happened. He approached, shouting at the couple to leave the student alone to which they replied, "We don't want any of you Chinks, either." The word spread quickly on campus, and by the following Monday there was a student-initiated information meeting on the incident. The tension, fear, and anger was thick and heavy, reminding me of the black and white race-related documentaries I had seen about the States in the 1950s. The student leaders let us know what happened, that the couple were not students (meaning they were local community members), that the African-American student did not want to return to campus, and that all students of
color should never walk alone on campus, especially at night, and especially not in the parking lot. I became afraid, for the first time, to continue my studies. I also became angry that I became afraid, and I continued my studies.

**Works Cited**


Nancy Barron has worked extensively with Nancy Grimm, serving as a writing coach at the Michigan Technological University Writing Center. In addition, Barron wrote the "Afterward" for Grimm’s Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times.

Nancy Grimm is the author of Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times as well as of many articles, including several award-winning articles, on writing center theory and practice. She teaches at Michigan Technological University, and has been involved with the MTU Writing Center for more than twenty years, directing it since 1985. Grimm has been executive secretary of the National (now International) Writing Centers Association, co-editor of The Writing Center Journal, and executive board member of the Midwest Writing Centers Association.