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Amanda Fields

Composing an Anti-Racism and Social Justice Statement at a Rural Writing Center

Abstract

This article describes the year-long collaborative composing process of a rural writing center seeking to develop an anti-racism and social justice statement. The author reflects on the way in which rural perspectives are often dismissed, often seen as provincial and hostile towards ideas that might be included in an anti-racism and social justice statement. The piece also connects theories of composing, fluidity, and identity to the writing of the statement and provides a detailed analysis of the lengthy, often challenging composing process used. The author finds that the collaborative composing process, more than the resulting statement, was significant to the ongoing dismantling of racist practices in the writing center and in training writing center consultants.

As writing centers seek meaningful implementation of anti-racist practices, the field has come to understand that such work is not defined by one set of strategies. An increasing number of writing centers have composed anti-racism statements as one practical way of reflecting this commitment, but rural locations are usually absent in these conversations. Here, I discuss the composing of one anti-racism statement in a rural writing center as a strategy toward anti-racist praxis. The collaborative composing process, more than the resulting statement, was significant to the ongoing dismantling of racist practices in our writing center.

The process of composing an anti-racism statement in a rural university community was a way to, as Anne Ellen Geller, Michele Eodice, Frankie Condon, Meg Carroll, & Elizabeth H. Boquet (2007) wrote, “actively work to unlearn” (p. 89) racism’s “everyday manifestation of deeply embedded logics and patterns” (p. 87). The concept of unlearning connects to an understanding of agency as fluid and nuanced. Awareness of this fluidity assists moments of agency, which can lead to meaningful action. In composing collaboratively, our writing center community rethought notions of individual and collective agency and, thus, moved toward an agentive role that could act upon our promises. This kind of fluidity also allows for resistance to binary notions such as rural and urban; simply put, it is possible to be radical in either of these spaces.

Since I grew up in a rural region and, later, joined a rural university for a time as a professor, I have considered the ways in which my rural background and the lives of rural students are often viewed through a moralistic lens. Those of us who “get out” of a rural space and/or deconstruct what are viewed as provincial attitudes might tend toward feeling simultaneously judged and praised by urban folk. In his work on how metronormative texts affect the envisioning of possibility for queer rural folk, Scott Herring (2010) made a case for “complicating geophobic claims that ruralized spaces are always and only hotbeds of hostility, cultural and socioeconomic poverty, religious fundamentalism, homophobia, racism, urbania, and social conservatism” (p. 9). Herring and others have pointed to the conceptual limitations of the terms “urban” and “rural”; as a result, spaces (and people) deemed rural are often dismissed. The composing process for our anti-racism statement chafed against simplifying urban and rural possibilities. Our aim was to actively promote social justice through attention to language and literacy on our campus.

In our regional, comprehensive, midwestern university, our staff of 12 graduate and undergraduate tutors spent a year of weekly sessions composing the statement. The idea for the statement, and the composing process, was initiated by the staff after a sample statement and response to that statement was shared at a training session. (This study of the composing process went through the IRB review process.) In discussing our process, which includes points of tension and retrospective commentary, I review common elements

that writing centers composing such statements might consider, and I situate these elements in our rural context.

In *Inside the Subject: A Theory of Identity for the Study of Writing*, Raúl Sánchez (2017) wrote,

If we think of identity as something that happens detached from human intention yet within the realm of human action, and if we see it as a necessary feature—perhaps *the* necessary feature—of discourse, then we might begin to conceptualize acts of writing as moments in which a writer’s agency is neither sovereign nor constricted but, rather, functional and symptomatic. (p. 72)

Sánchez argued that this understanding “has less to do with who writers think they are at moments of inscription than with the various dynamics at play during those moments of inscription” (p. 72); thus, “we should think of identity as a feature, a function, a symptom of every act of inscription, at work in every scene of writing” (pp. 72–73). If we understand identity and writing in these ways, then the scene of collaborative composing is a rich space indeed, and it is with this in mind that I have considered the significance of our writing center’s process.

Weekly, we moved forward on this statement, slowly and with a fair amount of uncertainty. We aimed to complete a text that reflected our commitment to social justice while engaging with elements of our rural, conservative context that we recognized and understood. We wanted this statement *to matter* in this particular space. This was our scene of writing: well-intentioned, with all the attendant, dangerous flaws. As the writing center director, I found some comfort with our process in reading Moira Ozias & Beth Godbee’s (2011) “Organizing for Antiracism in Writing Centers,” in which they argued that “while organizing should be thoughtful and systematic, we also worry that when reflection prohibits action, we fall into familiar patterns that reinforce the status quo” (p. 156). We did not want to mess this up, but we also knew that we had to be able to mess up in order not to maintain the status quo. So, we kept moving, knowing we would stumble.

When we composed together, our identifications were in constant motion. As we wrote and thought aloud, each of us made moment-to-moment decisions about what to say and how as well as when to be silent, ask questions, intervene, express confusion, disagree, or take a stand. How did the ways we were moving, constantly and rhetorically, demonstrate or work against action? An understanding of ourselves as not static or fully belonging to a single ideology or group became key, as did accepting the always distressing fact of the persistence of our own racism. It was the act of writing together that prompted these new understandings and rich reflections.

Frameworks to Compose Collaboratively for Change

There are numerous, nuanced theories of agency focused on movement and social action from the perspective of oppressed groups, and these theories contend that a composing *process* is critical for movement. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, for instance, Chela Sandoval (2000) described the fluid movements of composing, clarifying the effectiveness of a “reflexive mode of consciousness” that “intervenes in social reality through deploying an action that re-creates the agent even as the agent is creating the action—in an ongoing, chiasmic loop of transformation” (p. 156). The movement associated with this intervention “represents a mechanism for survival, as well as for generating and performing a higher moral and political mode of oppositional and coalitional social movement” (p. 156). Sandoval’s work clarified how significant this continual activity related to consciousness is for material survival. In *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*, Adela C. Licona (2012) imagined coalitional movement through “reverso,” a refracting gaze at normative contexts through which radical action becomes not only desirable but a possibility; in reverso, “the reversed gaze from third space is refracting and thus imprecise and even messy, affecting new and unpredictable assemblages” (p. 71). These refractions can be interpreted as innovations that involve collaboration. Refraction connects with the “identities-in-difference” that José Esteban Muñoz (1999), drawing from Third World, radical, and Chicana feminists, described as “a reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourse of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit” (p. 6).

While the foregoing theories center on methodologies of oppressed groups in dismantling racism and injustice, Krista Ratcliffe (2005), in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, theorized change from privileged standpoints of Whiteness. Ratcliffe offered a frame for White people to do the work of making apparent the stifling cultural logics of Whiteness. Ratcliffe characterized not only discourses of neutrality but also those liberal discourses centered in Whiteness, such as colorblindness, that perpetuate stratification. Rhetorical listening was thus an important framework for me to present to our group because as a theory for White people, the framework fit the group’s identity composition.

In her book, Ratcliffe (2005) posited “understanding” as “standing under”; when one “stands under” discourses to perceive more about how they are interacting and vibrating rather than simply trying to relate or divide across difference, one might be in a closer position to collaborate in radical, informed social change (p. 28). It is precisely this concept of “standing under” that gives pause, as it exemplifies the luxury of being in a stable-enough position to take in competing discourses and not feel drowned by them. I can more easily say “I

hear you” when I know I am the one with power. But, when applied with realistic deliberation, effective rhetorical listening prevents discourse patterns that overtake the discussion and become about the oppressor. Such cultural logics played out in our writing center’s composing process, so it was important to check our tendencies toward liberal discourse that was too tidy or that, through generalizations, flattened real change.

Our writing center’s composing process was also connected with an understanding of fluid agency and power. In “Shifting Agency: Agency, *Kairos*, and the Possibilities of Social Action,” Carl G. Herndl & Licona (2007) discussed constrained agency, clarifying that agency can be part of a recognition of agentive opportunities within the restraints of power structures since “authority and agency are not always opposing forces within complex institutions” (p. 134); the authors continued, “the same social subject can occupy different, sometimes contradictory identities and social spaces. Thus, the same person is sometimes an agent of change, sometimes a figure of established authority, and sometimes an ambiguous, even contradictory, combination of social functions” (p. 135). Both of these approaches—constrained agency and fluid agency—facilitate coalitional consciousness, which is a recognition of kairotic moments for coalitional action.

Writing centers are characterized by these fluctuations of power in kairotic moments, so the theory of constrained agency is a lens for contemplating writing center movement as well as understanding our writing center’s collaborative composing process. As Christine Hamel-Brown, Celeste Del Russo, and I (2017) argued in “Activist Mapping: (Re)framing Narratives about Writing Center Space,” constrained agency is a useful framework because “writing centers are often positioned between writing programs, communities of students, faculty, and various funding bodies” (Reconsidering Our Roles section, para. 2). Writing centers embody a fluctuating positionality where the dynamics of institutional movement offer agentic opportunity even for writing centers that have historically been marginalized. Constrained agency is also relevant to our moment as a writing center that was being built from the ground up without much support. Our campus had a relatively progressive student government that voiced concern and took action for underrepresented groups and student organizations on campus. But, as is the case on many campuses, communication between student and academic affairs units was not generally productive. We hoped our statement would help us straddle a line between strong student advocacy and expected academic support. If a writing center staff is made up primarily of students, and these students are trained to recognize the stratification embedded in academic literacies, then the writing center may be one critical site for connecting the aims of student and academic affairs units.

Agency, Capital, and Positionality

While the ubiquity of mission or values statements can lull composers into thinking the creative process will be simple, composing our statement involved rethinking the structures and systems we had either taken for granted or that had already caused us violence. As Laura Greenfield (2019) wrote,

Do we want our centers to play a central role in facilitating violence? Of course not! So part of our work will be to develop language in our missions, in our publications, in our discourses that clearly and pointedly articulates our rejection of participation in violent practices and our unwavering commitment to be facilitators of justice and peace. (p. 80)

Understanding that rural and urban are constructed, shifting concepts, I want to further define our context. Fort Hays State University (FHSU) is in a town of 20,000, one of the larger towns in Kansas for many miles. The closest major metropolitan area is three hours away. Many students who attend this university are from rural areas. Many are first-generation, undocumented, DACA (deferred action for childhood arrivals) qualifiers, military veterans, or Chinese students dually enrolled at FHSU and at universities in China. For a rural university in a White majority region with an on-campus enrollment of 5,000, the student population is relatively diverse, with, for instance, 30% of students classified as “Non-resident Alien.”

In a strongly Republican state, after the 2016 presidential election there was palpable fear on a campus with DACA students, international students, a strong queer presence, and others. Our staff reflected campus demographics: consultants were mostly White, of traditional college age, and from Kansas or surrounding Midwestern states. The staff included four graduate students, two of whom were international students from Brazil, seven undergraduate consultants from varying fields of study, and me. The 12 of us identified in a range of ways: LGBTQ+, first-generation, Gen 1.5, Latinx, White, multilingual, international, working class, Christian, atheist, etc. Further, most of the consultants held capital. They had been identified by faculty as “good writers,” a problematic assignment, but one that had already established the expectation that to compose and publish meant power. Additionally, the consultants perceived the systemic persistence of various inequities. Many of the students on staff were also aware that discourse about rural contexts can be static and dismissive. While our discussions were not openly framed in this way, the staff also demonstrated awareness of theoretical concepts such as constrained agency, as consultants debated whether it was possible, and how, to change the campus through their composing efforts and subsequent actions.

The writing center staff was formed through the recruitment I did on campus in my capacity as an English professor and advisor for the queer student organization on campus; through these roles, I met consultants who

reflected our campus demographics and needs. As with most writing centers, the staff rotated due to graduation and other shifts in the students' lives and due to funding. However, my particular recruitment methods resulted in a staff of students willing to confront discomfort with their own privileges and share personal experiences with marginalization. This, I believe, contributed to consultants' openness to the process of composing our anti-racism and justice statement. Additionally, the rural space in which we were located made certain forms of oppression clearer and more transparent than perhaps in other spaces due to the blatant and often religiously oriented tolerance of such oppression. We could perceive blatant injustice on a daily basis, and this exigency may have generated some openness to other, subtler forms of dismantling.

While I cannot remember a time when I was not interested in a pedagogy that facilitates how we sit with and listen to discomfort, I felt excited practicing it in this rural place. Partially, this place felt familiar. I grew up on a farm; half my family members were Reagan-era conservatives. This background helped me feel a little empowered to challenge rural students to consider alternative viewpoints. Far more students at this institution indicated anecdotally feeling some version of "I understand this alternative perspective, and I don't think you're imposing this on me, but we may still disagree" than at any other place I have taught. I have found that when people identify as liberal or progressive, it is sometimes a worse kind of challenge to sit in discomfort with them. Our rural context in generating our anti-racism and social justice statement seems a critical counter to assumptions perpetuated about conservative institutions.

Big and Small Statements: The Nuance of Institutional Positionality

Our work on our anti-racism and social justice statement was influenced by the University of Washington Tacoma Teaching & Learning Center's (UWTILC) "Statement on Anti-Racism and Social Justice Work in the Writing Center." I shared the UWTILC's statement with the consultants because reading it made me sit back and up. I simply wanted to know if they would have a similar response to the controversy ignited in the media by the statement. The statement opened by acknowledging the racist structures that influence writing and explaining that the critique of language is a formative part of a student's understanding of writing and learning. The statement also offered a reminder that linguists and writing researchers have long demonstrated the flexibility of language, a poignant framing given the critique of universities as liberal bastions with decreasing academic standards and/or loose political agendas. In the statement, "acknowledging and critiquing the systemic racism that forms parts of UWT [University of Washington Tacoma] and the languages and literacies expected in it" was described as necessary work (UWTILC, para. 3,

as cited in Inoue, 2017, embedded image). The UWTTLC followed up with a list of practices, which can be categorized as 1. an openness toward confronting racism and microaggressions; 2. a reflective approach to everyday practices and sustained assessment; and 3. the clarification that rhetorical situations are connected to attitudes and conventions of correctness. Then, a closing statement acknowledged that racism intersects with other injustices.

Nationally, there was a mixed response to the UWTTLC's statement. Asao B. Inoue (2017), the former director of the UWT Writing Center, housed in the UWTTLC, blogged that the media backlash was a "crapstorm" (para. 2). On *Breitbart*, for instance, Tom Ciccotta (2017) published "University of Washington Tacoma Declares Proper Grammar is Racist," which included an image of the dictionary covered by the international prohibition sign. In "Putting Writing at the Center of Inclusivity" (cited in Irving, 2017), UWT offered a positive reception to the statement as a response to the far-right backlash. Further, conservative blogger Nate Hoffelder (2017) published a rejoinder on *The Digital Reader* calling far-right interpretations "a load of hooey" (para. 2) and claiming that the university "is teaching its students to value the substance of an argument rather than its form and whether the argument followed all the nitpicky rules of grammar" (para. 8).

Amid the coverage, the university supplied more information to the media, clarifying that the writing center aimed to be "inclusive and welcoming to all students" (Hatch, 2017, para. 8). The university's statements to the media elucidated distinctions between critiquing and achieving standards, noting that the original statement was "not about changing the standard for how UW Tacoma teaches commonly accepted English, grammar and composition" and emphasizing that the university's graduates "achieve thorough proficiency in grammar and English expected in higher education and the workplace" (Hatch, 2017, para. 5). These conciliations should lead readers back to the original statement and its claim that acquiring critical awareness about literacy inequities "adds to" existing knowledge and encourages agency and flexibility (as cited in Inoue, 2017).

In *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*, Inoue (2015) argued that writing professionals tend to "define 'good' writing in standard ways that have historically been informed by a white discourse, even though we are working from a premise that attempts fairness" (p. 18). In academia at large, this idea continues to seem radical to many. It is difficult to overstate the connections between implicit perspectives within academia about writing and far right ideologies about race, as academia's systemic inequities and continued marginalization of student writing are the very things statements such as the UWTTLC's address.

Unsurprisingly, objections to the UWTTLC's statement presented several binaries, such as the binary between academia and the general public

or the binary between “good” and “bad” writing. In a video published by *The News Tribune*, a Tacoma newspaper, about the controversy, Matt Manweller, at the time a Republican state representative in Washington, stated,

You write well or you don't, you know... I cannot take their tuition money and then send them out there as poor writers because some group of social justice warriors thinks that it's OK for everybody to write however they want. (Koepfler & Santos, 2017, 1:05)

In his comments, Manweller demonstrated common assumptions, such as the idea that universities are not connected to the real world “out there” or the misconception that parameters for “writing well” are unrelated to educational oppression. Certainly, the credibility of universities hinges on the ability to reach out to the broader public as well as to facilitate critical thinking, even as Manweller's articulation of the boundaries between universities and the greater public rings false. As Inoue pointed out about antiracism in his comments in *The News Tribune's* video, “This is more about understanding how language operates in a structural way in society” (Koepfler & Santos, 2017, 1.30).

Those who resist the idea that racism is linked to the teaching of writing may believe that encouraging students to recognize the arbitrariness of such standards is a disservice. Yet, as Vershawn Ashanti Young (2010) wrote in “Should Writers Use They Own English?,” “dont nobody's language, dialect, or style make them ‘vulnerable to prejudice.’ It's ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people's language” (p. 110). To view communication as neutral is to forget what it means to interact. Concepts of fairness can cloud our judgments about what constitutes “good” writing, and this problem is sometimes compounded when well-intended people/teachers are told they are implicated in unfair practices. They may counterargue that they are teaching students to be reasonable, discernible, and professional. They may make arguments about measurement and evaluation, citing the rigor of academic writing and occupational expectations. They may bring up what they perceive as declining standards of writing, or they may value writing as connected to utility rather than flexibility.

This kind of response is certainly something we worried about when composing our statement, a feeling connected to audience and power. A writing center consultant is usually an undergraduate or graduate student, a member of a staff bound to imposed discourse and far removed from the administrative and programmatic decisions of the university. A writing center consultant, as well as a junior faculty member, might feel understandably hesitant about resisting norms. If a writing center, an often contingent space, challenges the racism in academic discourse, what happens to that writing center? If we challenge ourselves to develop pedagogies more radical than many faculty members accept, we also must be ready to accept strong resistance and unpleasantness.

Making inequities apparent is one step in training writing center consultants, who often inhabit several privileged standpoints. In “Exploring White Privilege in Tutor Education,” Dan Melzer (2019) wrote, “It’s a challenge for writing center directors to critically examine white privilege and white talk in tutor education and in the writing center” (p. 35). It is doubly challenging when faculty members themselves have issues with perceiving academic writing as anything but objective and neutral. A consultant who can accept the idea that no discourse is neutral and builds the capacity to be critical and innovative about discourse expectations must still contend with institutional denial. It is less of a bother to view academic writing as a stepping-stone and students who do not quickly achieve these standards as responsible rather than to face the insidious history of standards.

Because they are historically tied to dominant ideology, vision and mission statements run the risk of being viewed as meaningless declarations. I would argue, along with Mandy Suhr-Sytsma & Shan-Estelle Brown (2011), that “through sustained analysis of systematic oppression, writing center practitioners can increase their awareness that they are never completely outside of oppressive systems even as they seek to be more reflective, critical, and resistant from within” (p. 46). Mission statements are conventional but revisable. How we circulate language and for what purpose matters; in our case, working on the statement clarified the ways we inhabit academic space. As Erica Cirillo-McCarthy, Celeste Del Russo, and Elizabeth Leahy (2016) discussed in “‘We Don’t Do That Here’: Calling Out Deficit Discourses in the Writing Center to Reframe Multilingual Graduate Support,” because writing centers can be “reflective places wherein re-examination and re-assessment of frames and resulting praxis serves the entirety of the student demographic,” it is “a continuation of a long tradition” to engage in a persistent analysis of writing center discourse (p. 64). At the same time, in writing our statement, we had to become more cognizant about how *any* language that separates writing center staff from students in terms of what we do or don’t do can be read as exclusive, intimidating, and unwelcoming.

Our Composing Process

When our statement became a glimmer, I was in my second semester of directing the writing center. It had been stressful. Up to that point, the writing center had largely been run by students. As a junior faculty member, I felt caught between what my departmental colleagues saw as the purpose and needs of the writing center and the ways in which the student tutors had created an independent system. It was difficult to suggest changes, and sometimes gentle suggestions were met with eye rolls or ignored. I had one course release to direct the writing center and taught three courses per semester. Twice in my

first year of directing, somebody put an “X” through my faculty photograph in the hallway. I broke out in hives for the first time in my life. It got better. When I presented the UWITLC’s statement to the staff in October 2017, I did not expect they would want to write their own statement.

In embarking on the work in this new position, I realized I had to be curious and involve the consultants as much as possible. I had to understand and work with the local context. I had to listen to the consultants’ viewpoints and try to understand how these viewpoints came to be. From each of our perspectives, we had positional powers and gaps. For example, if consultants expressed hurtful and uninformed viewpoints about individuals and groups, who could call them out? Who could or would hold the blows? With a multifaceted staff, I often thought of Yolanda Chávez Leyva’s (2003) description of the “historical trauma, or soul wound, [which] is a result of colonization” and “a wound we experience in our spirits, our minds, and our bodies” (p. 5). We tried to recognize when and how to intervene in reactive tropes and to critique how our vantage points reified damaging interactions. We had to make visible my/our limitations, which is really the whole point of such a statement.

This all sounds very certain. But when the tutors said they wanted to write a statement, I had no idea what the process would entail. Where would we experience joy in the work, or even its promise? Where would we falter, become skeptical? Would we publish this somewhere? Would it matter? I considered how certain conditions, such as a fluctuating staff of undergraduate and graduate students, would affect our discussions, the composing process, and the flexibility needed for future revisions. Further, I considered how local writing center stories add to our understanding of situated contexts and histories. Approaching a local context with genuine curiosity seems critical to collaborative composition, as it is tempting to predetermine what we will find and do, and it is tempting for a writing center director to plant language and rigidly design steps. At the same time, local contexts are not singular; everything we did was part of a tapestry of ongoing labor. While the geographic context for our statement is significant, Wonderful Faison, Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison, Katie Levin, Elijah Simmons, Jasmine Kar Tang, & Keli Tucker (2019) reminded us that “we have to be thoughtful when we talk about regional particularity, ethos, and history” (p. 8). Manifestations of racism in local contexts are both of those contexts *and* part of mass systemic inequity.

I tracked our conversations about our statement through Google Docs with dated commentary. Early on, in October 2017, as we discussed the UWITLC’s statement, I asked the consultants what they felt that statement was doing. The consultants noted that ignoring race perpetuates racism: the statement was a proactive intervention. When we started our statement, it struck me that we were not reacting to isolated incidents; we were describing, to ourselves, the culture and vision that could guide anti-racist and justice

work. Still, a few consultants thought there was too much of a focus on race in the UWITLC's statement. This would echo through our conversations. For me, the challenge became to persuade the consultants that a blanket idea of injustice and inequity was not good enough.

In spring 2018, the staff requested weekly meetings consisting of readings, discussions, and writing time. The four graduate students facilitated these sessions; as the sessions went on, I started relocating. Sometimes this meant busying myself with other projects in the Writing Center and asking them to work together without me, or saying I was there to listen. I did this because I did not want to be viewed as the only person who would guide this statement. This process was long, confusing, frustrating, and enlightening. We built community. We intensively discussed inclusionary and exclusionary language. We felt lost about who this statement was for. We felt a collaborative statement was a way to speak back to concepts instilled in each of us about what writing should look like, how one should feel about it, and how it should be dealt with when one is not "good" at it.

We devoted sessions to identifying and examining stereotypes and microaggressions, digging into seemingly common ways of talking and doing and taking notes about what we had observed, experienced, or done ourselves. Many conversations initially focused on interactions with the international, multilingual students on campus, and we debated whether these examples fell under the category of microaggressions or stereotypes. We moved to discussing specific writing center interactions: examples included assuming multilingual students needed a translator; talking louder or slower to students who, by and large, know more languages than the consultant; and judging someone's reading and writing capabilities based on their performance in one language. Consultants said they were often compelled to focus on sentence structure with multilingual writers; for many consultants, working at the sentence level was viewed as an easier process than working out ideas. These consultants wondered how their actions and foci regarding correctness had reinscribed damage for multilingual writers. We were lucky to have two graduate students from other countries on staff who were enrolled in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages program to guide us through these discussions.

We then moved on to discussing ideas about language circulation through written documents. Consultants questioned the rhetorical purpose and effectiveness of a mission statement because, while they felt that the statement was important, they wanted to distinguish between ideals and actions. With this caveat in mind, we planned and wrote. We thought about how to demonstrate our understanding of different learning styles, challenge convention and oppression through intentional language, value students' thoughts over rigid ideals of correctness, and consider how language and subject matter can trigger people.

It became clear, however, that we were too focused on a remedy for intolerance and racism *in others* rather than in ourselves. My notes, for instance, include discussions about correcting others' behaviors and language use. The consultants were acknowledging the importance of specificity in addressing racism as well as the reality that each of us has certain parameters and experiences and positionalities that affect our way of thinking. But self-implication was not yet coming into the discussion. As Greenfield (2019) noted, writing centers should be "more critical in our examination of our sociopolitical contexts and more courageous in our ambition to reorient our view about who or what we are trying to make 'better'" (p. 86-7). Effective activists can look in the mirror and perceive ways they can learn and grow.

Since we were not yet implicating ourselves, I asked the group to review Suhr-Sytsma & Brown's (2011) "Theory In/To Practice: Addressing the Everyday Language of Oppression in the Writing Center," in which they offered two transferrable heuristics for anti-racist practice. In the first heuristic, "How Language Can Perpetuate Oppression," they discussed how common writing center practices uphold systemic oppression, while in the second, "How Tutors and Writers Can Challenge Oppression through Attention to Language," they offered strategies for resisting oppressive discourse in writing center interactions (p. 22). Everyday, oppressive language was described by Suhr-Sytsma & Brown (2011) as the "subtle," "ubiquitous" discourse that "often goes unnoticed," including language in student writing that "would generally not be seen as expressing an extraordinary or extreme view" (p. 15). This article was helpful in pushing us to revise our language to implicate ourselves.

We also kept returning to audience. Who would read our statement, and why? We imagined it on our writing center's home page, first. This way, students, faculty, and families might have occasion to view it. Writing center folk might stumble upon it. On the other hand, we doubted that middle or upper administration would run across it without prompting. The consultants aimed for student-friendly phrasing for obvious reasons: Students had to access our purpose to participate in the vision. At the same time, language specific to writing studies remained in the statement because ultimately the statement was for our writing center community and, as one consultant put it, "the way we will set our minds." It wasn't meant to be a static statement but, rather, a way to steel ourselves for growth. Our statement, then, was a living document that reflected collaborative compromise.

Our title was "Writing, Social Justice, and Anti-Racism Work: What We Believe" (FHSU Writing Center, n.d., para. 4). We opened with the word "writing" so that readers who are unfamiliar with or who hold certain attitudes about social justice and anti-racism would know we perceive a connection among these concepts. We were explaining things "we believe," so we felt

responsible for acting and learning with that knowledge, and we placed the word “work” in the title to connote this ongoing activity.

We decided the title last, and it went through numerous drafts. In spite of the rationale that race is the concept that binds and intersects with our perception of inequities, a few writing center consultants remained reluctant about the term “anti-racism.” Some believed that race was just one identity factor that should not be prioritized above others. Some were uncomfortable with the term being used in a rural community. As Inoue (2017) noted in his blog about grammar and racism, “words like ‘racism’ and ‘antiracist’ are trigger words” (para. 9). The consultants wondered if using the term “anti-racism” would welcome or discourage the addressing of racial issues. These were important questions for the consultants because if the aim was safety (often conflated with discourse comfort), we had to think about how our student population might engage with anti-racist discourse. We realized that when we talk about safe spaces, we have to address who we mean; there are boundaries to spaces, which means there are exclusions. Safety does not mean comfort for the privileged. Additionally, the presence of anti-racist discourse is an invitation that could become engrained through repetition. More important, this was an opportunity to move through discomfort and to ask hard questions about why terms that directly aim for social justice can feel like a puncture and why people with privilege have to get right back up from that surface wound and dig deeper.

In a place that considers itself removed geographically and culturally, and that reflects the white Christian majority of the region, there was a particular way of communicating about what it means to make others uncomfortable. While, over the course of discussing the statement, the consultants had developed comfort with the term “anti-racism,” they felt we could not expect this from our audience. The term “anti-” threatens action; it requests movement and not simply individual proclamations about whether or not one is a racist. The term jolts. For some readers, it may connote aggression or feel like propaganda. As Greenfield (2019) noted, “the liberal rhetoric of ‘inclusion and diversity’ has no place in a radical writing center... these concepts reinforce the fixedness of existing systems of power, merely nominally and futilely shuffling around its actors” (p. 129). As we viewed model statements from other writing centers, it became clear that we needed to think about what it means to be primed for knee-jerk negativity about anti-racism.

Still, including the term “anti-racism” was the only thing I pushed for without compromise. Our title deliberately embedded the term, though. We placed the word “writing” first because, we thought, “writing is what we do at the Writing Center.” We placed the phrase “social justice” next because it is connected to systems of inequity surrounding writing and education, and for us, this umbrella term connoted multiple groups. “Anti-racism,” the final term

in the title, was the active framework through which we hoped to seek social justice through writing.

We opened our statement with this paragraph:

The FHSU community is made up of people from multiple backgrounds and experiences with writing in the English language. In the FHSU Writing Center, we understand that these diverse backgrounds affect our preparation and encounters with writing. Academic writing requires learning how to navigate disciplinary conventions and expectations. This is a challenging process that involves time, patience, and work. We know from decades of educational research that our previous experiences with writing and language can influence how we learn. Since these experiences often reflect deeply-rooted social inequities, the Writing Center seeks to consistently develop everyday practices that advocate for equity and social justice. We believe that, in doing so, we are more likely to sustain our primary role as a resource center characterized by respect, safety, and inclusion. (FHSU Writing Center, n.d. para. 4)

In this opening, we aimed for a broad understanding of and invitation to our community. We did not yet discuss specific groups. We linked the idea of diversity to varying literacy experiences. We discussed “writing in the English language” to acknowledge the significant percentage of multilingual students on our campus. In hindsight, this phrasing does not do the work it should do; instead, this phrasing reifies “the English language” when the intention was to honor multiple languages and the activities of language learning. We also planted ideas about genre for students and faculty. Writers new to a genre may be sent to a writing center to “fix” errors that occur as students are familiarizing themselves with discourse patterns. We thought if professors were to read about our perspective on this, then we might begin to speak back to a few assumptions, such as the idea that writing centers have no business working with “content.”

In mentioning “decades of research” about writing in our statement, we wanted to show our audience that writing centers are informed spaces, and we wanted to establish our claim to informed pedagogy. While writing center consultants may not (wish to) think of themselves as scholars, they are practitioners about whom people make assumptions concerning levels of expertise, so this move went beyond establishing the scholarly aspects of writing centers; it aimed to clarify, as much for the consultants as for the potential reader, that the work done in our writing center was academically inclined and textured.

In setting up the statement in this way, we acknowledged the need to be direct about our capacity to do more than treat what are perceived as the technical aspects of writing. We wanted to show our awareness of how discourse communities are created and sustained. At the same time, we wanted to show that we would help with what are labeled as technical concerns and

would provide meta-commentary along with students about the inclusive and exclusive characteristics of grammar and genre. Both/and.

While we recognized that not every writing center session was an occasion for meta-commentary, we realized we could always facilitate rhetorical awareness of genre, a critical step toward awareness of inequities and accessibility. We expressed in our statement that we intended to “develop everyday practices that advocate for equity and social justice,” and we linked this intention to our desire to be respectful, safe, and inclusive. We then modeled the UWITLC’s statement’s list of specific writing center practices to offer our own concrete, guiding intentions, writing,

Therefore, we strive to:

- actively advocate for language usage that is mindful of differences
- recognize microaggressions and use these instances as opportunities for personal growth
- address written and spoken aggressions, including those about race, socioeconomic status, age, disability, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, national origin, military status, gender, gender identity, and gender expression, among others
- educate ourselves and our community about how modern racism and sexism, which reflect the ways racism and sexism persist in our societal structures, inform perspectives about capability with writing and language usage
- listen to the content of writers’ ideas and language usage prior to suggesting corrections to grammar and formatting, as we understand from decades of writing scholarship that an initial focus on grammar may stifle content development
- actively resist the notion that one’s facility with grammar is a measure of intelligence
- conduct ourselves as learners alongside other writers
- foster awareness of audience, genre, and social purposes of writing, with the understanding that language is ever-changing and that academic expectations of correctness are critical to navigating one’s field of study
- understand that mistakes are part of the learning process
- revisit (and revise, as necessary) these commitments and facilitate regular discussion and professional development so that these ideals manifest in our everyday practices. (FHSU Writing Center, n.d., para. 4)

This list went through several drafts, with wording initially pointed outward. Original versions of “actively advocate for language usage that is mindful of differences,” for instance, were structured to make consultants agents in intervening, calling out, and educating others. We eventually shaped

the language in the first bullet point so that it could include many kinds of interactions, such as advocating for a student if a consultant was not being mindful. This reconfiguration led to points such as the fourth bullet point, where we pledged to “educate ourselves” about racism and sexism.

In our third point, we listed specific marginalized groups. We debated whether and how to place such enumerations. A few consultants argued that opening our statement by mentioning specific groups would alienate other groups from the writing center, so we embedded enumerations within the action list, linking them to “written and spoken aggressions.”

Our final point was the most significant in shifting our language to implicate Writing Center staff. We stated we would “revisit (and revise, as necessary) these commitments and facilitate regular discussion and professional development so that these ideals manifest in our everyday practices.” Once this point entered our conversations, reminding us that we were as implicated in racist structures as anyone else and that we reinscribed hegemony when we claimed to hold the most relevant knowledge about racism, we revised the earlier points.

The creation of this part of the statement did not happen without serious tension and conflict. Running alongside of our collaborative writing, after all, was the keenly felt positionality of consultants who consistently moved in a space that identified them as both peers and authorities: not teachers, but also not exactly peers. This idea of consistent movement resonates with the concepts of constrained agency and a reflexive mode of consciousness in that the kind of fluidity encouraged by these theoretical constructs requires awareness of fluctuations in power at any given moment, the kinds of power that are not confined to an apparent hierarchical system. As a result, writing an anti-racism statement tended to conjure other tensions: What am I, as a writing center consultant, if I do not have all the answers, or if I do not know the right strategy to use? What am I if I, too, am racist?

As Suhr-Sytsma & Brown (2011) discussed, writing center work about oppression generally takes on one or more of these approaches: 1. “the recruitment of diverse staffs” and support of “diverse tutors” (p. 16); 2. “staff training that guides tutors into a greater awareness about systematic oppression” (p. 16); and 3. an emphasis on “increased reflection about privileged discourses, power dynamics, and forms of oppression at play in tutors’ and writers’ experiences in the writing center itself” (p. 17). Enacting the heuristics Suhr-Sytsma & Brown offered requires, initially, the acknowledgment that academic discourse is not neutral. In “Everyday Racism: Anti-Racism Work and Writing Center Practice,” Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll, & Boquet (2007) suggested that anti-racism work requires us to ask “what kinds of learning our current system of staff development offers, what kinds of learning we want to promote, and what moves we want to make with our tutors and the writers who

use our centers” (p. 89). The acknowledgment that neutrality hides historical and present racism is meaningless unless it evolves into an acceptance of and approach to unlearning.

Writing the statement was an opportunity not only to reflect on power and privilege, but also to keep intentions at the forefront of our practices. Unlearning is a constant, recursive process. It sounds dynamic to unlearn, to constantly be open to movement. Few like it. It is uncomfortable. For privileged individuals, the unlearning process involves a lot of stopping and starting; this may include denial, which can close the door on further learning, or puncturing silences. Unlearning is steeped in the slow realization that there is a marked difference between calling out and avoiding blatant racism and doing the ongoing, often unnoticed, labor of dismantling, bit by bit, an overwhelming system of oppression within and outside of the self. And when the labor of dismantling goes unnoticed, the process of unlearning can stall.

With their permission, I note that several consultants who worked on this statement admitted to feeling, at the outset, immense discomfort with the unlearning process. In reflecting a year later, one graduate student wrote,

To be honest, I had a pit in my stomach caused by the whirlwind of both intense anger and sadness. Then there was the guilt. I consider myself to be a loving and accepting person, so I was devastated to realize I had unknowingly used racist speech.

Since our meetings contained information and discussions about privilege and the insidiousness of white privilege, responses such as this were bound to surface. Gender was also a poignant factor in consultant reflections. As Ratcliffe (2005) wrote,

When white women feel guilty, their ears hear criticism not as an invitation to dialogue but as blame, and because an individual white woman knows that she is not personally responsible for the history of the social realm in which we all dwell, she can refuse guilt and blame.... (p. 91)

This means, Ratcliffe continued, “opportunities for dialogue are missed” along with opportunities for critical dismantling (p. 92).

For many in our writing center, then, forward movement and the agency to unlearn seemed to occur while collaboratively composing our statement, especially when we were asked to go beyond our individual experiences. One of our undergraduate consultants wrote,

I have taken a second look at the way I word particular things and the tone in which I may say them. Being white, I have to be careful with any reaction towards those of a different culture. I’ve tried to take our discussions and implement them into my everyday life.

These assertions sum up the ways we agonized and argued over particular words when writing the statement and describe how this process activated this consultant’s daily interactions. Importantly, during the writing process, consul-

tants seemed quick to question their assumptions but also to allow themselves guilt even as they moved forward with the group. Guilt is often tagged as a nonstarter in dismantling racism, but here it seemed necessary to movement and our composing process.

As we worked, consultants verbalized how their identities influenced our possibilities and limitations, and they demonstrated awareness about how they were influencing the foci of the statement. One consultant noted,

We got lucky having such a diverse group of individuals in our writing center. We had two Brazilian GTAs [graduate teaching assistants], individuals from the gay community, people from a church background, and both men and women. We had a range of beliefs and ideas and were still able to find a common middle ground for this statement.

Still, the writing center staff was most excited to discuss the identities it understood the most: For instance, we had many complicated discussions about the language and culture of sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia, but our conversations about race were less successful. It seems to me that the small percentage of African American students (3.6%) on our campus and in the state, as well as the university's lagging efforts to retain Black students, meant serious gaps in our ability to fully engage with certain kinds of Whiteness and White supremacy (see Morrison, this issue, for an analysis of the effect of racial tensions on student-tutors).

While declarations can be powerful motivators for action, vision statements that list active strategies do not qualify as evidence of practice. We questioned whether the words we wrote in our statement were doing something even as it was clear that, through the composing process, we had begun to change our everyday practices. Some consultants were wary of the statement carrying too much weight. One consultant wrote,

Publishing a statement, and everything leading up to it, is taking action in and of itself, but it's easy for it to become an unproductive result if there's no further action behind it. For a statement to become essentially a passive "insurance policy" instead of a roadmap for action effectively dampers all effort that led up to its creation.

This consultant was rightly critical about passive policymaking and the neutralizing effects of policies and visions that communicate the language of diversity and inclusion.

Writing centers can think of anti-racism statements as the moving product of a moving process. Such statements aim for a logical outcome (e.g., here is a set of principles on which we base the actions we have listed) even as they are (or could be) evidence of the way collaboration can capture textured, moving positionality. As Rasha Diab, Beth Godbee, Thomas Ferrel, & Neil Simpkins (2012) reminded writing center scholars, "a pedagogy of anti-racism . . . must be *multi-dimensional* and include a positive and actionable articulation of . . .

the ‘ought to be’ that we are aiming toward” (p. 1); the authors went on to argue that “because racism is both structural and everyday, anti-racism too must be structural and everyday” (p. 6). Understanding that anti-racist practices go beyond a single document, moment, or audience member, the composing process was valuable for our writing center—it was a way to develop a vision, connect that vision to specific actions, and offer a foundation for long-term commitment to racial and social justice.

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Fields: Composing an Anti-Racism and Social Justice Statement at a Rural

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