

Antiracist Protest Pedagogy

Writing about Writing, “Standard English,”
and Systemic Change

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Origins: The World on Fire

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police officers, including Officer Derek Chauvin, arrested George Floyd under suspicion of using counterfeit currency. In the midst of the arrest, Chauvin forced the handcuffed Floyd to the ground, then knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes. *Knelt* is far too gentle a word, obviously. For the first few minutes, the suspect—now himself a victim—struggled, gasping that he could not breathe, pleading “Please” and “Don’t kill me,” and invoking the spirit of his deceased mother for assistance. Eventually, Mr. Floyd stopped moving. Later, in an ambulance, he stopped breathing altogether. As footage of Mr. Floyd’s murder circulated, millions of outraged people flocked to Black Lives Matter protests across the United States. At the height of the protests on June 6, roughly five hundred thousand people attended marches or related events.

Kris, an instructor in the Department of Writing Studies and Rhetoric at Hofstra University, was not one of them. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, he left his home in New York City, the early epicenter of the virus, thinking he would be gone for a week, maybe ten days. Unwittingly, he became a nomad. He spent the first five months of lockdown shuffling between the homes of various relatives. And so, when he would have other-

wise wanted to take to the streets, calling out for racial justice, he found himself quarantining for two weeks in Maine, in submission to a public-health executive order regarding out-of-state travelers. He spent his days teaching an online class, writing revisions to something he hoped to publish, and staring at a lake, wishing he could be more useful to the cause than he felt like he was.

For years, Kris had been intrigued by the distribution of labor in society, how decentralized but nonetheless coordinated activity allows human beings to accomplish otherwise unfathomable things. Thinking about the sheer enormity of American racism, and not just its scale, but its depth, and its ability to extend its horrible tentacles into everything, he started to think about the distribution of labor once more: American racism as the result of decentralized but coordinated activity. Racists in every sphere, producing racialized, oppressive effects in every sphere. And, during those early weeks after George Floyd's murder, he spent a lot of time thinking about his own role in "the way things are," his complicity with—and even unintended contributions to—unjust systems. Late to the party though he was, he started considering how he might alter his own pedagogical methods to contribute to the distributed process of antiracist labor.

Kris's own research and teaching had, to that point, only obliquely engaged with matters of racial justice. Lamentably, he had mostly imagined education as a colorblind practice of economic freedom, or a colorblind practice of vaguely spiritual, intellectual freedom. During those weeks he spent in Maine, he was revising a book-length history of postprocess composition theory. In that text, *Postprocess Postmortem* (Lotier 2021), he parses two homophonic terms, *post-process* (hyphenated) and *postprocess* (unhyphenated). By Kris's accounting, the hyphenated term denotes a progressive, socio-political indictment of the process movement in collegiate writing instruction. Post-process scholars examined the interrelations of knowledge, language, and power, and their pedagogies commonly evidenced the principles of Freirean and/or critical pedagogies familiar to readers of this journal (23). Post-process scholars, in contrast, mostly didn't care if their process-era predecessors were insufficiently progressive. Instead, they faulted earlier scholars for holding reductive views regarding the generalizability of "the writing process" and the teachability of writing. As a historian, Kris was interested in postprocess, the discourse that had been largely apolitical, tacitly fine with the socio-political status quo. As an instructor, he wanted to combine the two discourses: to leverage the social critiques and problem-posing methods of post-process scholars while maintaining a postprocess understanding of how written communication occurs.

In what would become his book's fifth chapter (117–56), Kris had historicized the emergence of the writing-about-writing approach to teaching first-year courses, demonstrating its postprocess lineage, and he believed that a critically conscious version of that pedagogy could serve his students' needs. Per the postprocess account, to develop writing skills is to develop situation-specific writing skills that enable one to complete the requisite tasks of a given activity system (i.e., a profession or academic discipline). Thus, as a practical, institutional ramification, early postprocess scholars often advocated teaching writing in the disciplines (WID). They also advised instructors to personalize their instruction as much as possible, ideally operating as one-to-one mentors for individual students (126). Writing about writing would take the logic of WID and apply it to the first-year writing classroom, teaching students to write about the knowledge base of writing studies, and improving their meta-cognitive skills with regard to their own writing along the way (150). In an ideal scenario, students in such courses would produce texts that readers (typically their instructor and their peers) would respond to as meaningful transactions within real conversations (79, 139). In other words, students would produce and/or transmit new knowledge; their texts would do something in the world, rather than simply serving as academic exercises (103–7).

At this point in history, writing studies scholars collectively know a great deal about how writers develop writing skills, how writing functions in different domains, how various technologies affect what writing is/does/can do, and so on. Thus there is not a single writing-about-writing approach; an instructor can employ the broad framework to consider whichever questions interest them (151). Kris had been contemplating the postprocess denial of a single, general standard for good writing, and he was interested in analyzing its practical, political ramifications—especially the racialized ones. What if he and his students didn't just interrogate the function of "standards" at the level of "generalized academic writing," noting that this genre differs from that genre, according to its pragmatic functions in this or that discourse? What if, instead, they interrogated the function of standards at the level of sentence structures, at the level of phrasing, at the level of word choice? What if they analyzed the function of standards as such, by way of "standard language ideology" and its concrete manifestation, so-called Standard English? What if they asked where the supposed standards came from and how they change over time? What if they considered who had been deemed "qualified" to construct definitions of "good writing" and on what grounds? What if they talked about social inequality—about linguistic privilege and even linguistic

racism? In so doing, Kris thought that he and his students might achieve some liberatory goals.

Viewed from a critical perspective, so-called Standard English appears to be nothing more than the dialect (re)affirmed by—if not necessarily employed by—white, middle-class and upper-class native speakers of American English. A historical phenomenon, it exists within a continuous process of revision. Writing instructors, then, face a complicated question with ethical, political, and professional implications. They can endorse and/or require and thus take part in the ongoing social ratification of Standard English, or they can use their limited but hardly negligible social power to broaden the horizon of what will have been deemed acceptable linguistic behavior.

Determining an approach is far from simple, in practice. The instructor is trapped between two impulses: the idealistic one, aiming to change the world, and the pragmatic one, which acknowledges that students will have to live in this one, right now, and for the foreseeable future (Lee 2016: 179). From the idealistic vantage, teaching against Standard English might be considered a progressive action, oriented toward cultivating interracial cooperation and greater tolerance of linguistic diversity. Pragmatically speaking, though, refusing to teach Standard English to one's students might leave them disempowered within the various academic and professional institutions in which and through which they operate. As Lisa D. Delpit (1986: 382–85) argued long ago, some students might need formalized instruction in using the dialect of power because they do not receive that instruction informally elsewhere. A curriculum emphasizing fluency in “nonstandard” dialects might do disproportionate harm to students from racially and/or socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds.

By default, every instructor makes a tacit choice regarding these matters. It is very easy to do so unreflectively. Allowing the force of historical inertia (or the dictates of bourgeois “gentility”) to decide for them, many instructors endorse and require Standard English. Of course, some elect to change their own classroom practices, respecting students' rights to their own language(s). And yet, the latter set of instructors may have little to no impact on the assessment practices of other educators in their own academic institutions, let alone their students' future employers. What seems like short-term high-mindedness can produce undesirable long-term outcomes. Kris therefore questions whether college-level instructors should make such a consequential choice on their students' behalf. Sitting by the lake in Maine, he suspected that he could give his students the necessary analytical tools

to make informed curricular decisions, then empower them to choose for themselves how to proceed.

As odd as this may sound, there is one other thing that Kris wanted to let students decide: how hard they would have to work. Asao Inoue (2021: 64) has famously demonstrated the “White Language Supremacy” that underlies much writing instruction, and he has proposed the labor-based grading contract as a means of promoting racial justice in the classroom. His reasoning is straightforward: if Standard English is the dialect of the white middle and upper classes, then students from those groups will be able to produce more easily work that exhibits that “standard” (15). To create a more just system, Inoue argues, one ought to find some other measure for assessing students’ performance. In his estimation, labor, that is, how long and/or how hard one works, provides a more equitable instrument. When an instructor grades on labor, each student, regardless of their prior familiarity with purported standards of “quality,” will have an equal opportunity to earn an A (Inoue 2015: 80).

Kris understands and respects this rationale; even so, he is skeptical of curricular changes that cause all students to have to do more work. Many “well prepared” students, hailing from many different demographic groups, arrive to class on day 1 of the semester with a strong command of generalized academic writing norms. If those students signed up for conventionally graded courses, they might earn As with relatively little effort. Of course, their instructors would not know how those students acquired their skills, formally or informally, easily or through intense exertion. With that being the case, Kris does not think “well prepared” students should be indirectly penalized to fulfill his own vision of social justice. But, just as importantly, he is concerned that labor-time, which Inoue construes as being equally available to all students, is just as unevenly distributed as informal access to Standard English—and for similar, economically inflected reasons (see Carillo 2021: 14). Some students work full-time jobs to pay for tuition and/or living expenses. Some have economic means allowing them to focus solely on their studies, a real luxury. Because time is scarcer for the former cohort, each hour that they expend on a given assignment “costs” them more. If a student would prefer to be graded on the “quality” of their work (as defined by criteria that instructor and student co-construct) rather than the quantity of their laboring hours—particularly if they believe that they can attain a similar grade while saving time—Kris is willing to empower them to do so. But, no matter what they choose, he wants them to understand that their choice has ramifications for the fairness of the broader assessment system that their peers likewise inhabit.

Implementation: What We Did—and Why It Matters

Having explained our course's protest-related genealogy and its underlying antiracist principles, we would now like to discuss its implementation. The structure of our course was relatively simple, composed of three units. In the first unit, we considered the relationships between writing instruction and social justice. More specifically, we learned about the origins of "Standard English" (Curzan 2009) and questioned its ideological functions, particularly its use as "a socially acceptable measure for making decisions about affording access to people of color, obscuring the racist motivations behind" the practices of "people in power" (Greenfield 2011: 42). We read conceptually complex, scholarly texts, written in "nonstandard dialects," that question the hegemony of Standard English, and we asked whether we require a shared standard to facilitate communication, or if we can get by without one (Young 2011; Tonouchi 2004). We considered whether instructors have an ethical obligation to teach Standard English (Delpit 1986) or to attempt to undermine its status as the "norm" (Greenfield 2011; Young 2011). We learned about the effects of language privilege (Subtirelu 2013). We confronted the challenges of defining "errors," especially as some so-called errors really just amount to breaches of racially and class-inflected decorum (Horner et al. 2011; Barrett 2014). We contemplated whether (or not) all "errors" are treated equally, and whose "errors" might receive the harshest judgment (Williams 1981). We imagined what might happen if we redefined "fluency, proficiency, and even competence" in line with a translanguaging perspective, which sees language differences as "resources" instead of "problems" (Horner et al. 2011: 307, 304). We also considered how assessment ecologies impact student learning and "success" (Inoue 2015).

At the end of that first unit, each student wrote a two-part essay for Kris's consideration. In its first half, students explained key concepts from our readings and in-class discussions, demonstrating that they were, in fact, knowledgeable on relevant matters and capable of making informed decisions. In the essay's second half, students informed Kris on how they wanted to be graded for the remainder of the term: whether they wanted him to "enforce" the norms of Standard English, whether they wanted to be graded on "quality" or labor, and so forth. This was not just an academic exercise; assuming that their requests were reasonable and well grounded in our readings, Kris would honor them.

In the second unit, we engaged in "collaborative investigations" of writing-studies-related topics (see Lotier 2021: 103–7). In the process, we conducted substantial secondary research, wrote research proposals and

article summaries, responded to each other's ongoing research, then presented our findings to one another in both spoken and written form. In the third unit, we considered several examples of a semi-scholarly, semi-creative genre, the literacy narrative, and then composed our own.

Here, our three student coauthors, Aidan, Prameet, and Xiomara, will focus just on our course's first unit. They will explain how our shared experience differed from what they expected to encounter in our first-year writing course, what they learned in unit 1, and how those principles shaped their desires for the rest of the course. As should become clear, they carefully weighed published, scholarly arguments against their own experiences, political sensibilities, and educational goals. In their responses, they work through complex tensions: their ambivalent frustrations with and attachments to Standard English; their emotional responses to the task of developing their own assessment structures; what they knew (or strongly believed) to be good for themselves as individuals versus what they might generally believe to be good for society, in general.

In high school, Aidan was graded primarily on his ability to reproduce the template-driven structure of the five-paragraph essay, and he was told that his college professors would assess his work similarly. To his pleasant surprise, this rudimentary structure was nowhere to be found in the majority of his classes. Instead, his college professors, Kris included, encouraged him to find his own voice while effectively conveying his point. With that said, Aidan pushed back against a few aspects of our course's curriculum. For one thing, he wasn't entirely comfortable with the personalized grading policy in our course. In fact, he was upset by it initially. He wasn't sure how (or even if) Kris would actually apply his assessment suggestions, and he hoped to avoid increasing the course's difficulty for himself inadvertently. The assessment proposal he offered was, in his own words, as vague as possible. Ultimately, as the course went along, he came to recognize the merits of individualizing the grading system. In his estimation, having the freedom to experiment stylistically allowed him to drastically improve his writing and to find comfort in his own voice. He took risks and developed new skills, strictly because he was given the freedom to do so by the personalized grading criteria. But, at the outset of the course, he wasn't sure if he was setting himself up to get duped.

Aidan also offered a unique perspective on the politics of language instruction. He would readily acknowledge that Standard English is no more than the form of English used by middle- and upper-class white people; thus its veneration, accompanied by a disregard for other forms of English, shows

the strong racial cleavages within the United States. Like Laura Greenfield (2011: 39), he denied the possibility of actually controlling or regulating (i.e., standardizing) a living language like English. At most, he reasoned, powerful institutions like Oxford University Press, which has mandated the use of the Oxford comma, mark the “culturally accepted” linguistic devices in a given society. Even so, Aidan argued that attempts to instill something like a standard form of English were worth the effort—and justifiable in terms of social justice.

As he noted, residents of different Italian regions speak dialects so different that they might be construed as different languages. Those that speak only Lombard cannot effectively communicate with those that speak only Sicilian (or Venetian, or Piedmontese, and so on). This fragmentation leaves those that live in smaller villages without access to higher-paying jobs, despite any other qualifications, because they cannot effectively communicate outside of their small community. Such exclusion has particularly negative consequences for minorities and those of lower socioeconomic classes. The situation in the United States is not, at present, nearly so dire. African-American Vernacular English, various other “nonstandard” dialects, and Standard English are all “part[s] of a common language system” (Young 2011: 62–63). However, formalized instruction in Standard English may represent a countervailing, centripetal force, opposing the divergence of those various dialects and thus holding the language system together. If such instruction were to cease, the dialects might separate so sharply as to become mutually unintelligible. Or, as Aidan wrote at the time, “Advocating against the teaching of Standard English will only lead to the fragmentation of the diverse number of communities that speak English, leading to far less linguistic commonality that allowed for these communities to cooperate with one another in the first place.” As a result, Black people and other people of color might find themselves (even more) locked out of professional opportunities than they presently are.

In contemplating how a writing curriculum should operate, Prameet distinguished between the social responsibilities of the instructor and the rights of their students. Agreeing with Delpit, he argued that instructors should offer students instructions in Standard English, given its prominence in professional settings. Even so, he acknowledged the linguistic privilege of native speakers of English (in educational, but also in professional and social settings), and he supported Inoue’s argument that conventional models of writing instruction favor students already possessing such privilege. Therefore, he argued that instructors ought to reimagine the value structure, grad-

ing system, and goals of writing courses to make them fairer for all parties—perhaps by assessing labor and/or students’ relative levels of improvement in “quality”-related metrics. Ultimately, he supported students’ rights to use their own dialects in classroom settings, even if he felt uneasy about professors encouraging them to do so.

As a second-language English speaker, Prameet personally holds a somewhat complicated—though, we would argue, fairly typical—relationship with the supposedly Standard dialect. He doesn’t speak it all the time—and definitely not with friends. But his written “voice” and his spoken “voice” aren’t the same, and he usually writes in something pretty close to Standard English. Thus Standard English both is and is not “his own language.” And, as he emphasized, many other students of color have made Standard English their own, too—when they want it to be, at least. Given that he’s most comfortable writing in the ways his previous teachers demanded he write, using a slangier style would have felt contrived, artificial, forced. He let Kris know that he would be writing in a relatively formal, academic style, but he wanted to set up a grading assessment ecology that would allow him to take risks without fear of harming his GPA. He asked to receive ungraded feedback on his assignments, along with the opportunity to revise as many times as necessary to earn the grades he wanted. Kris was happy to oblige. In hindsight, Prameet can say that his personalized grading system had both an upside and a downside. On one hand, it allowed him to really explore his creativity; on the other hand, he admits that he may not have pushed himself as intently to produce his best work. For some students, the affective stew of fear, anxiety, and intensity, if properly harnessed, can provide a useful spur toward improvement.

Xiomara, more so than many other students, was willing to accept Laura Greenfield’s polemical argument concerning “Standard English”: that it is a fundamentally racist social construct, implicated in a long history of racialized oppression. As Xiomara noted, since the colonization of the Americas, native people were forced to forget their native languages to speak the one that their colonizers spoke. A belief that certain languages were superior to others made the diversity of languages disappear. Today, when institutions of power affirm the value of Standard English and dismiss “nonstandard varieties,” they engage in this same colonialist project. This dismissal has real impacts on communities of color, which have developed their own ways of speaking.

By way of a personal example, she demonstrated the racialized aspects of what Joseph M. Williams (1981) famously called “the phenomenology

of error.” In her own experience as an immigrant and a second-language English speaker, even when her language use seems to conform to that of her white peers, it is still not accepted as scholarly or formal enough. Often, it is laughed at. In her essay, Xiomara wrote,

I remember, when it was my first year being here, in the U.S., I asked the substitute teacher for my ESL class, “Can I go to the bathroom?” He immediately replied, “Excuse me! That is not the way you say it. It is ‘May I go to the bathroom?’” I felt confused since I heard my other American classmates ask the question the same way I did. This was not even a phrase or question that he was completely unfamiliar with. He understood that I wanted to use the bathroom. But, since then, I have adapted the way of saying “May I go . . .” instead of “Can I go . . .,” even if my classmates always do it the simple way. This action still makes me feel alienated since I was, I assumed, the only one to be pressured to say it this way. This makes me reflect that there are still people that expect those who are new to the English language to speak the maximum and proper way of English, even if those around you do not.

The upshot of this anecdote is straightforward: Xiomara’s personal, affective relationship to Standard English is different from that of many of her peers because the purported language norm has been weaponized against her. Employing supposedly “Standard” constructions, especially those that her white peers are privileged to ignore, makes her feel alienated.

In the second half of her essay, Xiomara asked to be graded primarily on the quality of her argumentative reasoning. Even so, she still wanted some small portion of her grade to reflect her proficiency in employing standardized spelling and punctuation. She presumes that, in her future journalism career, she will be required to write in standardized ways, and she wants to develop fluency with that dialect before she graduates.

Conclusion: Risks Worth Taking

Doing something new is hard. There are always growing pains. As we’ve previously discussed, Aidan didn’t feel fully comfortable generating his own grading criteria, so he tried to be as vague as possible in offering Kris guidance. Xiomara didn’t feel entirely comfortable doing so, either. Even though she knew what her strengths and weaknesses were as a writer, she didn’t feel fully equipped to determine her own curricular path forward. Prameet felt a bit more confident in that regard. But, ultimately, he was doing something he had never done before, too, and that produced a sense of confusion.

Let’s be clear: at first, none of us, Kris included, was entirely sure

how—or even if—this new, antiracist writing-about-writing approach was going to work. It did, though, for the most part. In the end, we all learned some things—about the subject matter and ourselves. We developed some skills, refined others. We took risks. We asked questions we had never had to ask before. We took personal responsibility where, in the past, we had deferred authority to others. Some of our risks paid off. These were important steps, even if they were small ones.

Obviously, we were never going to solve American racism in a single-semester course. But this course wasn't really oriented toward doing so, anyway. It was a writing course, and we were learning how to write, and respond to, and assess writing better. Still, it's true that all of these activities have racialized aspects. There are racist ways to write and antiracist ones, racist ways to assess writing and antiracist ones. Smart and well-intentioned people, including the four of us, will probably always disagree on which tactic is best suited toward remedying which specific social injustice. But we don't all need to agree on where, exactly, we're going or even on how to get there. It's better that each of us takes that uncomfortable, uncertain first step—the one we've decided on our own to take—then another, then another.

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