Getting Started with Equity

A Discipline Brief for
Equity in English Composition:
Catherine Savini, Ph.D.

Contents

About the Contributor

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Discipline Brief: Equity in English Composition

Catherine Savini, Ph.D., the Writing Across the Curriculum Coordinator from the Reading and Writing Center Director and Professor of English at Westfield State University, explores how adjusting pedagogy, providing equitable feedback, and eliminating linguistic bias can reduce inequity in English composition courses.

Summary of equity-related areas of concern

In 1972, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication ratified a statement affirming Students' Rights to their Own Language, which declared that "rejecting one's native dialect is to some extent a rejection of one's culture." These ideas did not gain much traction in the field at the time. However, more recently, linguistic justice has taken center stage as scholars from linguistics, English education, and composition and rhetoric expose the damaging impact of linguistic bias and reveal the disjuncture between working to increase racial diversity on campuses and seeking to maintain homogeneity by imposing a standard that tends to exclude minoritized students.

Racially minoritized students who speak in languages or dialects other than "white mainstream English" are typically asked to code-switch, meaning that they are pushed to leave their native language and dialects at the classroom door. This sends a message to these students that their dialects are not appropriate for use in sophisticated academic discourse and, for many, reinforces the message that they do not belong. The term white mainstream English serves to emphasize that "standard English" is not actually standardized, but rather intermixing and dynamic, and that it is currently defined and enforced by the dominant group.

In addition to the dialects used in class discussions, assessing student writing based on the expectations of white mainstream English is inequitable, alienates many racially minoritized students, and maintains white supremacy. As long-time enforcers of dominant language ideology, which promotes the idea that a single dialect exists and is superior to others, English departments and composition programs have a responsibility to work to promote linguistic justice and racial literacy.

Suggestions for change

Adjust pedagogy to signal belonging to racially minoritized and multilingual students.

- Ask students to include what languages they speak when they introduce themselves and recognize multilingualism as a strength.

- Make course content accessible to all students by slowing down, checking in to ensure understanding, avoiding unnecessary jargon, and simplifying your language.

- Work together with students to create group guidelines for class discussion, so that all students can define what they need to participate effectively in class.

- Invite students to find and draw from research articles written in other languages.

- Invite students to write in whatever language they are most comfortable using when they are working out ideas.

- Assign texts written by writers from diverse language backgrounds, particularly texts that draw on a diversity of languages.

- Stop promoting code-switching by including a syllabus statement that explicitly invites diverse languages and dialects into the classroom.

- Create writing assignments that invite code-meshing - the integration of multiple dialects into a single text - or allow students to write in dialects and languages other than white mainstream English.

Provide feedback and assess equitably.

- Focus feedback on student writing on content, rather than on grammar.

- Don't mark students down if they are not writing in white mainstream English. Instead, ask students if they want feedback on how well they are meeting the expectations of white mainstream English and, if they do, provide it without marking them down.

- Share the communicative burden by working harder to understand your students orally and in writing. If something doesn't sound right to your ear, that doesn't necessarily mean it's an error.

- Use labor-based contract grading, so that all students in the classroom have full access to the range of grades available. Labor-based grading contracts (here's a sample) value labor, effort, and process rather than quality, standardization, and product. These contracts are negotiated at the beginning of the semester and students are assessed on their labor as indicated by their attendance/participation, assignment completion, and adherence to deadlines. Students' grades are not based on the instructor's perception of the quality of their writing.

Explore linguistic bias as a form of systemic racism that impacts all institutions.

- Promote racial literacy by introducing students to conversations about how the language that we use maintains white supremacy.

- Assign texts about linguistic racism/linguistic justice.

- Design assignments that invite students to explore power dynamics inherent in the language used in everyday interactions and in higher education institutions.

- Assign literacy narratives that invite students to explore and celebrate their languages and better understand the impact of the US education system's valorization of white mainstream English.

Recognize anti-black linguistic racism as an oft-considered justifiable form of discrimination that is rooted in slavery and integrally tied to the violence against Black bodies.

- Train teachers to recognize Black language and educate themselves about the origins of Black language and sociolinguistic theories.

- Stop telling Black students they have to learn "standard English" to succeed, and don't penalize students for using Black language in the classroom.

- Acknowledge Black language in the curriculum and study/value Black language on its own merit, rather than defining it as a departure from white mainstream English.

- Teach students not to appropriate Black language.

- Assign readings by Black language scholars.

- Create opportunities for Black students to "explore or connect with their cultural knowledge and perspectives."

English, composition, and rhetoric departments should lead the charge in promoting linguistic justice campus-wide, given that these departments have upheld the standard and hold power.

- Hire multilingual faculty, staff, librarians, and tutors.

- Ask librarians to gather resources composed in the languages spoken by students.

- Create student-facing materials in the languages spoken on campus.

- Organize a panel with multilingual speakers to share their experiences on campus.

Further reading

Baker-Bell, April, Bonnie J. Williams-Farrier, Davena Jackson, Lamar Johnson, Carmen Kynard, Teaira McMurtry, "This Ain't Another Statement! This is a Demand for Linguistic Justice," Conference on College Composition and Communication, July 2020.

https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/demand-for-black-linguistic-justice

Despite the fact that the Conference on College Composition and Communication published a statement on "Students Right to their Own Language" in 1974, research and practice in the field of rhetoric and composition overwhelmingly have not reflected the values articulated in this statement. In 2020 at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, six Black scholars created a "Statement on Anti-Black Racism and Black Linguistic Justice" that included five demands. These scholars recognized the disjuncture between the stated beliefs of the field — that we value students multiple language backgrounds and recognize language as integrally linked to culture and identity — and our practices, and they wrote these demands (quoted verbatim) during a surge of support for Black Lives Matter after George Floyd's murder.

- teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English!

- teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy!

- political discussions and praxis center Black Language as teacher-researcher activism for classrooms and communities!

- teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness that works to decolonize the mind (and/or) language, unlearn white supremacy and unravel anti-Black linguistic racism!

- Black dispositions are centered in the research and teaching of Black Language!

"Students' Right to Their Own Language." College Composition and Communication, vol. 25, 1974, pp. 1–65.

https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/srtolsummary

Official publication abstract: This statement provides the resolution on language, affirming students' right to "their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style" that was first adopted in 1974. The statement also includes an explanation of research on dialects and usage that supports the resolution, a bibliography that gives sources of some of the ideas presented in the background statement and some suggested references for further reading for those interested in the subject of language. The publication of

this controversial statement climaxed two years of work, by dedicated members of CCCC, toward a position statement on a major problem confronting teachers of composition and communication: how to respond to the variety in their students' dialects.

Horner, Bruce, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur. "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach." College English 73.3 (2011): 303-21.

https://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=faculty

A translingual approach questions our education system's monolingual mindset. People are speaking and writing English all over the world and the different varieties of English are constantly intermixing and evolving over time. As a result, "standard English speaker" and "Standard Written English" are bankrupt concepts. In fact, "myths of unchanging, universal standards for language have often been invoked to simplify the teaching and learning of language. But these have often resulted in denigrating the language practices of particular groups and their members as somehow 'substandard' or 'deviant.'" (305) The monolingual mindset that pervades education implies that heterogeneity impedes communication; a translingual approach, on the other hand, asks us to shift our perspective

Monolingual mindset	Translingual mindset
Difference = deficit	Difference = resource
Variation from standard = error	Variation from standard ≠ error
English = standard/static/homogeneous	English = intermixing/dynamic/heterogeneous
Standard enables communication	Standard excludes/denigrates certain groups

Savini, Catherine. "10 Ways to Tackle Linguistic Bias in Our Classrooms." Inside Higher Education, Jan. 27, 2021

https://www.insidehighered.com/users/catherine-savini

This article presents the issues with asking students to code-switch: it devalues their languages, thereby suggesting that they are not up to the sophisticated task of academic discourse, and it leads students to feel as if they do not belong at college. The article provides concrete strategies for faculty from all disciplines to address linguistic racism, such as including a syllabus statement, not marking students down for not meeting the expectations of standard English, asking students what languages they speak as part of introductions, providing students opportunities to write in their own languages and working harder to understand students' written and oral communication.

Inoue, By Asao B. *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom.* **The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. January 4, 2019.**

Official publication abstract: In Labor-Based Grading Contracts, Asao B. Inoue argues for the use of labor-based grading contracts, along with compassionate practices to determine course grades as a way to do social justice work with students. He frames this practice by considering how Freirean problem-posing led him to experiment with grading contracts and to explore the literature on grading contracts. Inoue offers a robust Marxian theory of labor that considers Hannah Arendt's theory of labor-work-action and Barbara Adam's concept of "timescapes." The heart of the book details the theoretical and practical ways labor-based grading contracts can be used and assessed for effectiveness in classrooms and programs. Inoue concludes the book by moving outside the classroom, considering how assessing writing in the socially just ways that he offers in the book may provide a way to address the violence and discord seen in the world today.

Young, Vershawn Ashanti. "Should Writers Use They Own English?" Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies 12.1 (2010): 110-218.

https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=ijcs

Young argues that students should be invited to integrate their "own English" into their speaking and writing in the classroom and that asking students to code-switch, conforming to the expectations of standard English, is rooted in racial prejudice. To make his argument, Young launches his essay in response to a New York Times blog post by Stanley Fish, in which Fish explains that it is wonderful that students speak multiple languages or dialects but that, when in the classroom, they should adhere to the expectations of standard English. According to Fish, instructors must teach students standard English to protect them from prejudice; to this, Young responds, "But don't 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" (110). Young advocates for code-meshing over code-switching, integrating multiple dialects into a single utterance or text, and he demonstrates through his essay that Black vernacular English is more than capable of developing a sophisticated academic argument. Young contends that inviting other Englishes into the classroom will enable students to draw on more linguistic resources and, ultimately, combat linguistic bias.

Brown, Tessa. "What Else Do We Know? Translingualism and the History of SRTOL as Threshold Concepts in Our Field," College Composition and Communication, 71,4 (Jun 2020): 591-619.

Official publication abstract: This article uses storytelling, rhetorical analysis, and critical historicization to critique the color-blindness of the writing studies movement's two key texts, Elizabeth Wardle and Douglas Down's Writing about Writing reader and Linda Adler-Kassner and Wardle's edited collection Naming What We Know. Juxtaposing the writing studies movement with contemporary translingual and hip-hop theory, as well as the history of the Students' Right to Their Own Language Resolution and CUNY's Open Admissions period, the author argues that the writing studies movement's pivot toward neoliberalizing higher education excludes multilingual and diverse

writers from its pedagogical audience, as well as its conception of writing expertise. The author calls for a broader conception of writing studies that can theorize literacy in all its complex global instantiations.

Marsellas, Nick. (2020). Preempting Racist and Transphobic Language in Student Writing and Discussion: A Review of Alex Kapitan's The Radical Copyeditor's Style Guide for Writing about Transgender People and Race Forward's Race Reporting Guide. Literacy in Composition Studies 08.1, 76-80.

https://licsjournal.org/index.php/LiCS/article/view/705/441

This book's review advances the importance of "establishing a shared foundation of race and gender literacy at the outset of the course," so as to enable students to have productive conversations about race and gender. To build such a foundation, the author advocates asking students to read these two writer's guides at the beginning of the semester: The Radical Copyeditor's Style Guide for Writing about Transgender People and Race Forward's Race Reporting Guide. Both guides not only educate students about the importance of the language we use in conversations about race and gender, but they also examine racism and cisgenderism as systemic. By "pre-empting racist and transphobic language," instructors can level barriers to entry into conversations about race and gender (students are less likely to worry that they will say the wrong thing) and avoid subjecting students of color and transgender students to linguistic violence.

Helpful Links

A Discipline Brief for Equity in English Composition: Rachel E. Johnson, Ed.D