Antiracist Writing Assessment in General Education

ReImagine Project Final Report, 2023

Submitted by Drs. Keri Behre and Kate Comer on behalf of

English Department Composition Committee

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Project Synopsis

"Antiracist Writing Assessment in General Education" was a 2-year initiative to provide paid equity-focused pedagogical development to faculty who teach PSU's largest general education course, Writing as Critical Inquiry (WR 323). As we noted in our proposal,

> WR 323 fulfills the University Writing Requirement for all majors, is specifically required by four majors, and serves over 700 students a year from across campus. Troublingly, marginalized student populations tend to disproportionately receive grades of D, F, or W in WR 323, and also show lower persistence rates compared with their more privileged counterparts. By studying and altering the assessment practices in the course, we hope to improve completion rates and progress toward graduation through disciplinary best practices.

Moreover, because WR 323 is taught predominantly by adjunct instructors, this funding provided essential support for ongoing curricular and program development.

After collaborative research in Winter and Spring 2022, the PIs created a curriculum of shared readings, teaching/learning resources, and discussion prompts. During Fall 2022 and Winter 2023, 11 composition faculty participated in the hybrid learning community on Canvas and on campus. We read and discussed current disciplinary research on linguistic diversity, culturally responsive and trauma-informed pedagogies, and Universal Design for Learning while pursuing practical questions about course design, project scaffolding, feedback, and alternatives to conventional assessment methods. These activities provided faculty with opportunities to connect, support, and learn from each other while grappling with complex concepts and new teaching tactics. They also resulted in a variety of concrete changes to WR 323 course designs as faculty adapted emergent best practices to PSU's particular students, programmatic goals, and their own pedagogical priorities. Subsequent extensions of this work include planned orientation workshops for new Graduate Teaching Assistants in the English Department and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, with longer-term plans to publish the learning community curriculum on PDXScholar.

ReImagine Alignment

This project was a natural fit for the ReImagine grant's priorities of racial justice and student persistence. Informed by disciplinary research, the Composition Committee recognizes that "White language supremacy permeates academic discourse" (Proposal). If we want to foster justice and inclusion, teachers must confront our own biases about "good" writing, as well our habitual grading practices that perpetuate exclusionary and oppressive standards. These arguments align with educational movements toward Universal Design for Learning and "ungrading," and they resonate deeply as we collectively recover from the educational upheaval and traumas of the COVID pandemic.

By adopting antiracist pedagogies, PSU is working toward cross-disciplinary best practices in tandem with other institutions of higher education in the region and around the world. By highlighting inequitable assessment norms, we can also address the disproportionate non-passing grades distributed to marginalized students that undermine persistence toward graduation. As we observe academic freedoms eroding elsewhere in the country, we feel extremely grateful that PSU is directly supporting antiracist initiatives–and we look forward to translating this work into open education resources that will serve teachers and students within and beyond PSU.

Project Outcomes

The primary goals were to 1) develop professional development resources in equitable writing assessment, and 2) engage WR 323 instructors in a hybrid faculty learning community. Both of these were completed successfully and now provide a strong foundation for future use within and beyond the English Department.

Professional Development Resources
- Annotated bibliography of relevant scholarship in social justice and writing pedagogy
- Shared collection of related teaching/learning resources
- Canvas course with 5 multi-week modules of scholarly readings, teaching/learning resources, and discussion board conversations

Faculty Learning Community
- Online and in-person conversations over 2 quarters
- Enhanced relationships among 11 faculty and administrators
- Follow-up focus group to identify areas of success and for improvement

This project demonstrated classic tensions in higher education: between interest and availability, and between community and accessibility. Many faculty wanted to participate but did not have the time or bandwidth to take on extra labor. Timing was certainly an issue, with widespread "post"-pandemic exhaustion exacerbating the difficulties of contingent employment status. For those who were able to participate, scheduling remained a serious challenge; while we agreed

on the value of in-person meetings, an asynchronous approach was essential to navigate schedule conflicts. Participating faculty consistently noted that the opportunity to connect with their fellow teachers was a major benefit. Their feedback has resulted in plans for ongoing informal gatherings, as well as workshops on pressing concerns like secondary trauma.

Use of Funds

- Research and course design: course buyouts for 2 PIs in Winter and Spring 2022
- Program participation: stipends for 8 adjunct and NTTF faculty in 2022-2023
- Development of CLAS and English GTA training workshops: stipends for 2 subject-matter experts in Summer 2023

Future Plans

Within the Composition Program, this initiative has provided a foundation for ongoing faculty development through peer mentorship and collective activities like reading groups and workshops. For example, we will be launching an instructor-led series of informal meetings based on requests for continued community building. Program assessment will continue to track completion rates and demographics to inform future efforts for equitable student outcomes.

In the English Department and College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, we will be offering equitable pedagogy workshops to new Graduate Teaching Assistants during Fall 2023 orientations. We anticipate future collaborations with Applied Linguistics' Linguistic Diversity and Discrimination Awareness Project and the Office of Academic Innovation, and we welcome potential extensions of this work across other units.

Finally, we hope to document and circulate these results through open education resources and scholarly publications that contribute to important conversations about social justice in higher education.