

Chapter 7

Discriminatory Writing Assessment Practices in First-Year Composition: Challenges and Solutions

Suresh Lohani

The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

ABSTRACT

Discriminatory writing assessment practices in first-year composition are rampant across academic institutions in the U.S. These practices have helped perpetuate standard language ideology that serves the interests of the institutionalized racism and done a disservice to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), whose writing practices fail to abide by the conventions of standard English. This chapter holds implicit biases and stereotypical perceptions engendered by instructors and academia chiefly responsible for these discriminatory assessment practices and argues that these go against the spirit of social justice in writing classrooms, particularly impacting academic trajectories and other life chances of BIPOC students. Finally, it offers some recommendations on how these unfair assessment practices that rest on implicit biases can be checked using culturally relevant pedagogy, which incorporates translingualism and multimodality, and the roles different stakeholders can play in this process.

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INTRODUCTION

Discriminatory writing assessment practices that go against social justice are quite visible in first-year composition. These stem from implicit biases and stereotypical perceptions that instructors seem to nurse towards BIPOC students. The lens through which many writing instructors look at the writings of BIPOC students is quite prejudiced, conforming to institutionally endorsed racist assessment criteria. Citing William Morris and colleagues, Toth (2018), in “Directed self-placement at “Democracy’s Open Door”: Writing placement and social justice in community colleges,” states that “many of [these] two-year college students suffer the consequences of socially biased writing assessments designed to keep second-language learners, low-income students, and others who have traditionally made up the majority of community college students off the highway of educational privilege . . .”(p.164)”. Thus, the instructors, who are often actively involved in designing these assignments, tend to nurse pre-conceived notions that BIPOC students lack proper writing skills. They only endorse “standard English” in academic writings and treat other English vernaculars as “substandard,” apparently embracing whiteness and placing non-white students at a disadvantage with regard to assessing their writing projects.

Whiteness promotes standard English and marginalizes BIPOC students by privileging itself to endorse or reject the differences of other variants. Barnet (2000), in “Reading “Whiteness” in English Studies,” asserts, “Whiteness maintains power ultimately by reserving for itself the privilege of recognizing, defining, and denying difference on its own terms and to its own advantage” (p.10). By succumbing to the clout of whiteness, the writing instructors appear to be ignoring the social justice component by favoring the monolingual students over those from other racial backgrounds. Rawlinson & Willimot (2016), in “Social Justice, Learning Centredness and a First-Year Experience Peer Mentoring Program: How Might They Connect?,” state that “social justice is about providing empowering opportunities for individuals and groups so that they can achieve their desired goals” (p. 42). Thus, to foster social justice in writing classes, instructors must be cautious to ensure that students from across the raciolinguistic spectrum are provided equitable opportunities to attain their academic ambitions. This calls for the writing instructors to shun rigid assessment practices and embrace maximum flexibility, which recognizes the linguistic assets of a diverse student population. In “Beyond translanguaging,” Lee (2016) calls for a need to “reject the notion that any particular criterion can be set for all students of a particular racial, ethnic, national, gender, or sexual identification and do our best to understand students’ individual aspirations and the means to achieve those aspirations” (p.185). The unbendable evaluation benchmark may be made elastic if instructors, supported by academia, implement culturally relevant pedagogy which

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