

## Confronting the Comp Classroom: Implementing Anti-Racist Pedagogy and Navigating Opposition

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### PROBLEM

Cal State Monterey Bay (CSUMB) is a relatively new university; we just celebrated our 25th Anniversary. We are a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with 45% Latinx student population, 53% first-generation students, and many from working-class backgrounds. Since its creation, CSUMB has been a campus dedicated to interdisciplinarity. Because of this we have a diffuse model for general education courses including our first-year composition (FYC) courses. FYC courses are currently offered by four different departments in three different colleges. Our program, Humanities and Communication (HCOM), offers approximately 70 to 75% of the FYC courses on campus.

In 2017 the CSU system issued an executive order (see EO1100 & EO1110) to eliminate noncredit-bearing remedial writing and math courses based on research showing that students of color were disproportionately, negatively impacted by remediation courses. Nearly 25% of students placed in remediation did not continue in college beyond their first year. This change required all CSUs to reconsider how students are placed in FYC courses and what support is offered to them. Despite offering the majority of FYC sections on our campus, HCOM was not included in our campus conversations about how to best serve students in accordance with EO1100. Instead, administrators and the director of the program that offered a former remedial writing course, created a two-semester “stretch” course to fill the gap in student support left by eliminating our remedial writing courses. Students earn credit for both semesters of work, but only fulfill the general education requirement after the second semester is completed.

Over time, HCOM has grown increasingly concerned about how students and which students are placed in the stretch model. We think the current practice reflects deficit-thinking about our students, while we subscribe to an assets-based approach. Because of this we have redesigned our FYC course and created a new support course grounded in anti-racist, culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP). We refer to our anti-racist FYC course, support course, and the related pedagogy, professional development materials, workshops, and trainings as our anti-racist FYC ecology. Below we discuss

how we built our ecology, and offer insight from our experiences for other administrators and programs interested in doing similar work.

#### EXIGENCE

Beginning in the spring of 2020, Daniel, Kelly and Sam collectively decided to address the issues of linguistic racism and systemic coding of translingual students of color locally by transforming our current ecosystem of FYC courses and supports into an ecosystem based on anti-racist, asset-based and culturally sustaining pedagogies. We each had particular reasons for our work on the project:

**Daniel:** I reconsidered my approach to FYC after posed with the question, “what good is anti-racist writing if there’s nothing to show for it?” As a Black scholar and proponent of language decolonization, this question became less about what I failed to do as a practitioner, but rather the consequences of neglecting to focus attention on anti-racism in the classroom. Because we’ve historically taught FYC based on the assimilation of standardized English, failing to subvert this practice is to promote white supremacy (Inoue, 2019, p. 377).

**Kelly:** As a translingual Latinx and Indigenous woman from Paso del Norte, I noticed discrepancies in how translingual students were coded as language deficient on the white-linguaging Central Coast. In policy, the CSU moved to eliminate remediation, but remnants of Prop 227 remained entrenched in our institutional structures. My efforts to bring anti-racist practices to FYC had been largely curbed by institutional walls, 2020’s shift in attention towards racial justice opened new doors.

**Sam:** I am frustrated by the prevalence of faculty and administrators showing deficit-thinking about our students. As department Chair, I realize how important it is for students to know they belong and can succeed in college. Using asset-based, anti-racist pedagogy in FYC courses will help with the sense of belonging and provide students with the writing and reading skills necessary to get their degrees.

Together, we have an understanding of the history of linguistic racism and deficit-based classroom pedagogies that exist across colleges. Furthermore, we understand the importance of establishing a more equitable and inclusive FYC program in the fledgling years of a university, such as ours.

## RESEARCH

In our approach to the revision of our FYC ecology, we understood that one of the first tasks for seeking campus approval for our FYC revisions was grounding our work in a strong pedagogy. We knew that there was campus support for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP—see Gloria Ladson-Billings), and decided that Django Paris’ (CSP) would both fit our needs and our campus culture. Paris, with H. Samy Alim, developed CSP as a pedagogy that perpetuates and fosters - or sustains - “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling.” (Paris and Alim, 95). Because CSUMB is a diverse HSI, CSP responds to both the student population and our goals as racial-justice educators. CSP was an easy “sell” because support for CSP already exists at our university: our center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment lists “Culturally Responsive Teaching and Assessment” as a professional development priority and provides resources on CSP.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges we saw with how and which students were taking which FYC courses at CSUMB was an entrenched White Language Supremacy (WLS). We wanted a pedagogy that was not only responsive and relevant, but that actively supported and sustained linguistic and literate pluralism without the hidden curriculum of educating students to be White-listening, White-speaking, and White-writing (see Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores). CRP, while laying the groundwork for maintaining heritage culture and language, does not actively guarantee that it will be sustained. CSP, however, while still being attached to a familiar campus pedagogy, is built on that very imperative.

Recognizing WLS as the motivator for how and which students were taking which FYC courses, we also wanted to link CSP to anti-racist assessment. We align ourselves with Asao Inoue when he says “If you use a single standard to grade your students’ languaging, you engage in racism,” and built anti-racist assessment—like labor-based grading contracts—into the foundations of our course revisions (“How do we language?” p. 359). By grounding our work in a pedagogy that was adjacent to one already broadly accepted at CSUMB and pairing it with anti-racist assessment practices, we created the necessary structure for building our ecology.

## SOLUTIONS

Months before the courses were designed, Sam initiated a conversation with our interim Dean about our vision for FYC. The goal was to explain how our asset-based approach would encourage students to be bold and more meaningfully engage in their learning. Our courses provide a model

of an optional workshop for students who want more support. This helps our campus to align with the CSU vision when it removed remedial composition courses from our curriculum. While he was warm to the idea, we knew we had much work to do. The courses needed to be structurally sound because of the broader campus context; we could expect pushback from administration, and another department that also offers writing courses.

Like other campuses, when we transitioned to remote instruction due to COVID-19, equity gaps became even more apparent. While this shift made collaboration on the project more difficult, it bolstered our commitment to the courses and the need for a new approach to FYC. Over the summer we asked Daniel to join the project and together, he and Kelly took the lead in designing the courses. Sam's work was to continue to promote the courses and the need for more courses like it in our curriculum to our Dean. We wanted his full support well in advance of the courses reaching him in the curricular approval process. With each of us realizing our project through our individual strengths and institutional roles, we were able to approach our redesign, with clear and tangible goals that included key stake-holders, administrative buy in, and curricular shifts.

As Daniel and Kelly got to work, one of their first goals in their curricular efforts to redress FYC was to combat WLS. Because language is inherently attached to our social identity and our identities are a result of racialization, language too, falls victim to racism. Forcing students to abandon their home language suppresses their identities and also establishes a level of false superiority in the language they are asked to assimilate to. To work against this, we've designed assignments aimed at supporting student voice, leveraging lived experience, and developing an arena for analyzing text in relation to culture, context and power dynamics.

Specifically, Kelly developed "Corrido-ing Composition," an assignment that engages students in community and oral history writing through corridos (Mexican folk ballads). Students compose corridos while considering genre, language, audience, community and cultural epistemologies, information literacy, and knowledge production all within the very real contexts of institutional power dynamics and "what counts" as university writing. Daniel designed a similar assignment, "Language as Culture," which asks students to consider the relationship between language and culture to develop attention to voice and authenticity. Through textual analysis, students develop an eye for audience, genre and voice, which naturally draws upon descriptive frameworks as opposed to prescriptive frameworks that reinforces white language supremacy.

To further support our anti-racist ecology, we also re-center student voice and experience by publishing a writing and research journal, *Writing*

*Waves (WW)*. *WW* is produced by students in a digital publishing practicum and publishes essays by FYC students. *WW* is the accessible, zero-cost course text for FYC. The final assignment in our course is to produce an article that students are encouraged to submit for publication. *WW*, as part of the structure of our anti-racist ecology, allows students to see their diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences as valued and valuable.

Considering anti-racist grading and assessment and moving away from the historically problematic nature of traditional grading systems based on WLS, we use grading contracts adapted from composition scholar, Asao Inoue. Since compositionists agree language and meaning are constructed, we understand there are multiple ways to evaluate writing (Inoue, 2019, 384). By focusing on labor, rather than rank and measure, students are able to take risks and approach assignments creatively. By incorporating grading contracts, the idea of “safety” that surfaces as a condition for learning becomes a mechanism in which students feel supported and affirmed in their task of languaging. Daniel and Kelly worked together to distill their exemplar assignments, the development of *WW*, and anti-racist grading into the foundation for their course design.

Once these major curricular shifts were articulated in a mentor syllabus for each course, our courses went through a pre-review from our campus General Education Curriculum Committee (GECC). Interestingly, another department that offers FYC also proposed a new course, which uses more traditional frameworks and requires an additional support course. Unfortunately, this department continues to remediate students at levels disproportionate with the rest of the CSU. Both courses were pre-reviewed at the same time by a small sub-committee of GECC members. While the more traditional course passed through without revision, our GE course generated multiple questions about pedagogy and grading and required revisions to satisfy the sub-committee. We revised per the sub-committee comments and resubmitted for full review, where the course received approval. It’s worth noting that because of the anti-racist components of our courses we had to jump additional hurdles to receive approval as compared to the more traditional FYC course. We received similar questions from the college curriculum committee even after the revisions.

#### TAKEAWAYS AND NEXT STEPS

Because redressing our FYC program is in large part, a cultural shift, it is important to acknowledge the urgency of our current cultural climate which prompted two of the largest governing professional bodies of composition, National Council of Teachers of English and Conference on College

Composition and Communication to take stances against WLS in FYC. Justifying our changes through these two organizations allowed us to add weight and urgency to our arguments: the field supports these moves, the time for significant structural change is now.

And the changes we are institutionalizing now are very much structural: like all ecologies, the writing ecology we developed are networked across campus. No matter how strong our program is, these outside influences could make or break our ecology, and there are valid concerns with how our students are placed into FYC. Identifying key stakeholders and cultivating their support is a crucial, lengthy step. Leveraging our curricular leadership positions in the review process to advance the courses was also a key step. Despite this we still received more pushback than other courses that use traditional pedagogies.

Building the structure and support so all faculty who teach FYC are adequately resourced and prepared to meet our anti-racist outcomes is also crucial. Most administrators and academic leadership are familiar with traditional pedagogies, and less so with anti-racist, decolonial classroom practices. Reaching out early on in our process allowed us time to introduce them to new concepts and to tie our new FYC courses directly to student success, building pathways for success and support as we institutionalize our FYC ecosystem.

It is important to keep in mind that we *are* building an ecosystem, including cohorted professional development workshops for faculty teaching our revised model of FYC. Our workshop curriculum includes focus on syllabus and assignment design, grading and assessment as well as lesson planning. Faculty interested in teaching in our program must apply and commit to professional development, which they receive a certificate for upon completion. Through administrative support, advocacy, professional development programs and the revision of our FYC courses, we hope to evolve our ecosystem further and transform the way composition is taught at CSUMB.

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