The Practice of Problem-Posing the Nature of Judgement

URL: http://tinyurl.com/uohabitsofwhiteness

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The purpose of this discussion is to have a dialogue over this question: How might UO writing faculty interrogate the nature of judgement and white language privilege in their feedback on student writing? One way to do this is to examine your institutionalized and personal practices as racialized ones. This means you begin with the assumption that your current practices, as helpful or successful as they have seemed to be to this point, are inherited from those before you in this space therefore structured by the white institution and white disciplines you work within and from.

Step 1: Some Ideas to Consider (10 mins)
To begin our discussion, I’d like to offer these few ideas and questions that may help us see or hear things in your teaching and reading practices from a racialized perspective.

In Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times, Nancy Grimm argues that literacy in the academy is ideological work, not a neutral skill. Her ideas apply to the writing classroom too. She says:

writing center people would deliberately call attention to the ways that literacy practices carry cultural knowledge, ideology, and values. Academic literacy would not be imagined as an individual skill but instead as a set of cultural practices. Writing center workers would talk about the beliefs encoded in these practices, making the tacit understandings explicit, offering students more choices and more information about how these practices work. Within an ideological understanding of literacy, rather than ignore cultural variables -- gender, race, age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, institutional status -- that often visibly mark our positioning in institutions, we would call attention to the ways that these variables both shape and limit our perspectives, acknowledging that the map we use to understand the system is influenced by our particular history in the institution. (32)

Speaking of the dominant, white ideological stance and normalized subjects in academic institutions, Grimm continues:

Usually we are unaware of what is “cultural” about our “normal” ways of interacting with language until we experience cultural conflict . . . if we are members of the culture of power -- the dominant white middle class -- we are unaccustomed to having our way of doing things challenged, and we have little if any experience understanding ourselves as members of a “culture.” (33)

James Paul Gee defines Discourse as more than language, but combinations of structures that circulate around human exchanges and communications:

what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations. These combinations I call "Discourses," with a capital "D" (“discourse” with a little "d," to me, means connected stretches of language that make sense, so "discourse" is part of "Discourse"). Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. (Gee 6-7)
Thus Discourse is more than language, and so racial formations are closely associated with particular Discourses. This means that one DOES and EMBODIES Discourse in a variety of ways (see habitus below). To practice fluently any Discourse a person must take on -- embody -- a particular set of acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, gestures, body positions, and clothes. Thus, in order for any student’s discourse to be accepted as academic Discourse, a teacher must accept the student’s discourse as an embodiment of the academic Discourse, which is a white academic Discourse. How fair does this seem to expect non-white students to embody such a white Discourse, to act and believe and look like a different racialized body in a white space, like your classroom or your writing assignments?

Pierre Bourdieu offers the concept of habitus that is similar to Gee’s Discourse. Habitus, or sets of “structuring structures” that are predisposed to tacitly structure and organize our practices, as well as the perception of those practices (Bourdieu 170; San Juan 52), helps us think of the embodied ways that learning to communicate in a secondary Discourse involves (according to Gee, a secondary Discourse is one that is learned in addition to one’s home or primary Discourse -- academic Discourse is a secondary Discourse). There are three dimensions in which habitus embellishes Gee’s ideas of Discourse and helps us see the racialized elements of writing practices in the academy. As habitus, Discourse is:

- **Discursive** or linguistic, that is, it is marked by discourse and language practices;
- **Material** and bodily, or marked through people’s material conditions, environments, and what is noticed on their body as important; and
- **Performatve**, or through the ways we perform, behave, and act, which includes what we consume in conspicuous ways in Capitalist western culture. (Inoue 42-43)

If Discourse and habitus are loosely synonymous, then how does this change what we say we do when we help students with their writing in a writing course, say, through our feedback practices? How does what you do in your writing classroom, or through your grading policies, serve various students who might be grouped along socio-cultural and racialized lines differently? Who is the ideal student, what habitus do they embody? Does that ideal student and their habits seem non-racialized, non-gendered, able-bodied, sex-less?

In “White Woman Feminist,” Marilyn Frye, drawing on Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984), offers a list of dispositions that equate to whiteliness, or whitely dispositions. These dispositions might be thought of as habits of whiteness, and they amount to the following:

- **Being a judge and peacemaker**: a disposition toward giving responsibility and punishments, being the preacher and martyr, taking responsibility and the glory.
- **Self-understood benevolence**: a disposition toward seeing oneself (and other whitely people) as benevolent, good-willed, fair, honest, and ethical.
- **Being procedurally ethical**: a strong sense of right and wrong, usually rooted in dispositions toward forms, procedures, due process, and rules as the basis of the ethical; to be good, one acts according to the rules, which is understood as principled.
- **Authority**: a disposition toward running the show, or aspiring toward it, and a belief in one’s infallible authority in most matters. (Frye 153-54; Fox 202)

How do any (or all) of these whitely dispositions, or habits of whiteness, inform your practices as a reader of student writing? Might they harm your students of color or privilege your white students? How might you take this into account in your assessment practices?
Step 2: Considering White Habitus (10 mins)

Consider this summarizing of the literature on whiteness (http://tinyurl.com/habitofwhitediscourse) that my students and I created over the last few years. It offers six habits of white Discourse that can be centered on in our work today in order to decenter them in our work in our classrooms with students. Likely, some or all of these habits of white discourse match habits you practice in your own reading and evaluation processes in your classroom. Take a few minutes to read over the handout and consider what it offers.

Step 3: Reading Your Own Feedback (10 mins)

Look over the paper with your feedback on it that you brought today. Choose only 1 or 2 habits of whiteness. Without judging yourself, identify statements/judgements and explanations of your judgements that you made in your feedback to the student that fit your chosen 1-2 habits of whiteness. What habits of whiteness did you practice in this feedback to this student? How did those habits manifest themselves in your words, or your assumptions that allowed you to offer those words to a student. Take some notes. Identify the following in your notes:

- the judgements you made on the text (what you said to the student)
- the ways you explained those judgments (how you came to that judgment)
- the source(s) of your judgements or how you came to value or expect such things from a text like this one

If you see ways you didn’t fully explain the reasons for those judgements, make a few notes about that.

Step 4: Write a Letter to Me (15 mins)

Considering your notes, write a letter to me (it should start, “Dear Asao”) that explains your feedback as a practice that is informed by white habits of discourse. Choose one judgement or explanation of a judgement to discuss in your letter. Explain how either the judgement you made on the text or the explanation you used or assumed is informed by a habit of whiteness. Use this pattern of rhetorical moves to structure your letter to me:

1. What is the judgement? What did you say? (the judgement)
2. How did you explain that judgement to the student? (the explanation)
3. Where does that judgement come from in your life, training, reading, experience? (the source)
4. How might this judgement or its explanation of yours be informed by a white habit of Discourse? (the habit of whiteness)
5. End with an open-ended question about the nature of judgement in such cases. (the problem posed)

Let your question come out of your discussion inductively. Try to make this question one that opens up or reveals a paradox (a set of irreconcilable differences or contrary ideas, all of which have merit) about your judgement of this paper or of judgement in general.
Short Bibliography on Whiteness


