

Building Racial Literacy in First-Year Composition

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The author presents findings from a research study that examines the use of a racial literacy approach to teaching first-year composition.

As I was reading a book on a recent flight from New York to Dallas, the woman seated beside me asked if I was a student. I told her that I was a professor and was conducting research for an article I was writing on racial literacy. Her response to this surprised me. Usually when I tell people both in and outside of the academy that I write about racial literacy, they lift an eyebrow, smile, and ask, “Really? What’s that?” Instead, this woman completely ignored my mention of it. She seemed more interested in knowing my destination than entering into a conversation about race. When I said I was going to an academic conference in Orange County, California, she flashed a smile and began telling me about some of her much loved spots in “The OC.” The fact that I was traveling to one of her “favorite places in the world” helped her feel more at ease with me. Within moments, our benign conversation traversed several boundaries. Carol (a pseudonym) spoke about her divorce, her *current* lover (there had been a few), and her opinion of the forthcoming presidential election. The needle of our conversation became stuck on politics, as it wasn’t long before we realized our views couldn’t be more different. Carol’s thoughts on the election appeared to reflect her current status: a White, fifty-something, wealthy (she mentioned this *several* times), conservative Republican, just as my opinions reflected my station in life: I am a Black, younger than fifty, working-class, left-wing Democrat. Needless to say, we saw the forthcoming election through very different lenses.

Carol believes that America is “a country which offers everyone fair opportunity to make it.” She illuminated this point by telling me about her current boyfriend, whom she described as someone who was once “poor White trash” with irresponsible parents and a limited education, but because he was self-determined and lived in America, he was able to work himself up from being a “pool boy” to the CEO of a leading pool supplies company in the United States. What Carol failed to recognize in her telling of this quintessential “bootstraps” story was the privilege already afforded to her boyfriend by working as a pool boy for wealthy individu-

als, and his opportunity to learn the pool business from other White men. When I mentioned that her boyfriend's race (and gender) might have made a difference in his ability to climb the ladder of success, she politely shifted the conversation and said, "But look at you, you made it to be a professor. You're attractive; being attractive makes a difference. Ugly people just don't have a shot in this world." Although it took me a moment to process how the subject of beauty had crept into our discussion, I quickly realized that Carol had refused all of my invitations to talk about race. In fact, she was determined that we would talk about *anything* except race. As I listened to her, I recognized how race and class were coded in the stories she shared; however, each time I tried to center race in our conversation, she would smile and politely change the subject.

I share this story not to talk about the interesting people I meet while traveling to academic conferences, but instead to offer an example of how many of us are like Carol—we go out of our way to avoid conversations about race. Race, a socially mediated construction (Omi and Winant) is so central to how we live, yet is one of the most arduous topics to discuss. When we talk about race, we tend to discuss it in our particular racial and ethnic affinity groups. We often share (inappropriate) jokes or derogatory comments about the "other" group. Rarely do inquiry-based, cross-dialogues (across race, gender, and other diversities) occur. Much like my conversation with Carol, talk about race and racism in literacy classrooms is often avoided as well. However, when such conversations are attempted, it is by a well-meaning teacher who may not have spent adequate time building racial literacy skills (Rogers and Mosley, "Critical," "Racial"; Skerrett; Sealey-Ruiz); thus, the conversations become stilted, sometimes disparaging, and any chances at a productive exchange about race go awry.

Talking about race is an important skill to possess. I earnestly enjoy engaging people in cross-race dialogues. Given the complexity of race and the feelings and ideologies embedded within this concept (Perrone), I recognize that not everyone is as passionate about having these conversations as I am. However, passion for the topic should not dictate whether or not these conversations are engaged. Students in our classrooms must be taught how to participate in honest discourse on race and racism so that they do not feel the need to shy away from these topics or become defensive or belligerent when discussions about race arise.

The purpose of this article is to present a case for building racial literacy in our students. I offer support for my argument by foregrounding a three-month study I conducted in my community college first-year composition (FYC) classroom. I hope that this article will contribute to the growing body of research that emphasizes the need to develop racial literacy in English classrooms (Skerrett) and to talk about race in literacy classrooms (Greene and Abt-Perkins; Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf). The following research questions guided this study: *What does racial literacy skill-building look like in FYC? How do FYC students use their writing toward building their racial literacy skills?*

Racial Literacy and Related Frameworks

Racial literacy is a skill and practice in which individuals are able to probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race and institutionalized systems on their experiences and representation in US society. Students who have this skill are able to discuss the implications of race and American racism in constructive ways. A desired outcome of racial literacy in an outwardly racist society like America is for members of the dominant racial category to adopt an antiracist stance and for persons of color to resist a victim stance. As it relates to the current research study in an FYC course, racial literacy is the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that involve race or racism. The concept of racial literacy as discussed in this article is informed by scholarship that recognizes race as a signifier that is discursively constructed through language (Hall); fluid, unstable, and socially constructed (Omi and Winant) rather than static; and not rooted in biology, but having “real” effects in the lives of individuals (Frankenberg). I also call on Guinier’s work, which implores a shift from racial liberalism to racial literacy; on the work of researchers who grapple with the invisibility of race in classroom settings (Greene and Abt-Perkins; Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf; Guerrero; Bolgatz) and communities (Twine, “Racial,” “White”); and the work of scholars who specifically focus on racial literacy in English classrooms (Sealey-Ruiz; Skerrett) and composition classrooms (Johnson). Guinier critiques racial liberalism as an inactive, deficit approach to racial equality that subjugates Blacks to the position of victim and does not enforce the required antiracist stance that Whites must take against their own racist ideals and actions. Guinier cites the historic 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* court case as one of the most ineffective racial liberalism projects in our history—a case that commanded national and international attention but did not change much on the ground for Black people in the United States. Guinier reminds us that “racial literacy depends upon the engagement between thought and action. . . . It is about learning rather than knowing. It is a project that is an interactive process in which race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment” (114–15).

Racial literacy requires familiarity with unconscious bias as well as structural racism. It demands a far more nuanced approach than typical charges of racism or race carding (Diallo). Twine conceptualizes racial literacy as a project utilizing concrete artifacts (social practices). In her work with White parents, she notes how their social practices made up the “invisible labour” (900) of antiracist movements. The parents in her study paid particular attention to their White privilege and exercised it in support of antiracist measures. In another study involving preservice teachers in a book club that featured books in which White characters struggle with racism and White privilege as part of a literacy methods course, Rogers and Mosley used discourse analysis methods to describe how their African American and European American students used talk, writing, and action to “work together to construct particular meanings”—what they refer to as “racial literacies” (“Critical” 108). Rogers and Mosley focused their analysis specifically on the strain between their participants’ talk and action. They found that racial literacy requires action—discus-

sion of racial issues, reading and writing about racial issues, and, when necessary, interruption of racist acts.

Building Racial Literacy in Traditional Literacy Classrooms

Racial literacy involves moral, political, and cultural decisions about how an English or writing classroom can be a catalyst for societal change. First, it informs the participants of injustice through the use of dialogue, reading, viewing, and listening to critical texts and journaling, and then develops their critical thinking and conversation skills around issues involving instances of racism, discrimination, and prejudice. Recent studies on the racial literacy development of teachers and students in school settings reveal the myriad challenges involved in taking up this work with both the professionals and the students they teach. A study by Rogers and Mosley (“Racial”) involving second-grade children’s racial literacy development shows that young White children in a literacy classroom can *and do* talk about race, racism, and ways in which they can become antiracist. Utilizing a discourse analysis framework for analyzing “white talk,” their study argues for guided discussions on race and racism with young children and provides examples of what this process sounds like.

Skerrett’s study with English teachers in the United States and Canada provides further insight into the challenges of explicitly teaching on issues of race and racism to build students’ racial literacy. The actions of the seventeen teachers in her study were assembled into three categories: apprehensive and authorized; incidental and ill-informed; and sustained and strategic. Recently, other scholars (Greene and Abt-Perkins; Dutro, Kazemi, and Balf; Dutro, Kazemi, Balf, and Lin) provide insight into the risks and rewards of centering race as a topic in K–12 classrooms. However, there remains a dearth of theorizing on racial literacy in the college classroom (Sealey-Ruiz). An Internet and library Web-based search on the topic of racial literacy in composition classrooms yielded only one doctoral dissertation (Johnson), although scholars (Kynard; Gilyard) take up the issue of race in the composition classroom without explicitly labeling it as racial literacy. In her study of a composition and rhetoric classroom, Johnson discusses some of the challenges encountered by professors whose college courses deliberately focus on increasing racial literacy while working in a discipline, university, or department that is immersed in racial liberalism. She notes that these professors have difficulty in connecting their ideologies to the actual practices that occur in the environments where they teach their racial literacy courses. Her question specifically asks: how does an instructor teach a racial literacy course within a university immersed in racial liberalism, and what happens when classroom discussions become overly personal or tense?

The present study adds to the research on racial literacy building in composition classrooms and focuses on how students engage with specific texts and use their *writing* to build racial literacy. By achieving racial literacy, students have the tools to understand how racial signifiers operate in a text while also creating awareness of each student’s positionality.

Racial Literacy in First-Year Composition

In 1989, FYC courses at the University of Texas at Austin drew national attention to the debate over how these courses should be taught. Prior to 1989, and until the present day, compositionists cannot seem to agree on just how critical the discourse in FYC really is. First-year composition students come into our classrooms with a variety of skills and abilities, many of which are often below college academic standards. This reality leads many professors to rationalize FYC courses as an extension of basic writing courses in which techniques for grammar and sentence structure are the foci. As a result, FYC is frequently viewed as the place for developing the basics for standardized writing exams and helping students acquire the “real-world” writing skills they will need for employment. The problem with this outlook for FYC students is the courses’ overarching benign neglect of preparing them for the real “real world”—one filled with inequality, privilege for some and not for others, and racism. These harsh realities are seldom talked about. A pedagogy of racial literacy in FYC, as shown in this current study, can not only build students’ reading and writing skills but can also provide them with a framework to make sense of the social injustices they will experience or witness as Americans.

In the next section, I discuss the two significant themes that emerged from the writing of my FYC students as they engaged with two particular texts explicitly centered on race. The excerpts included here demonstrate some of the ways in which they used writing to make meaning around issues of race and racism.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Setting

Costland Community College (a pseudonym) is located on a seventy-five-acre campus in a mostly White middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhood in a large metropolitan city. The majority of my students commuted forty-five minutes or more to school. During the fall 2006 semester, for four days a week, two hours per class session, over a twelve-week semester, my students read texts, watched videos, listened to speeches, participated in discussions, and produced writings that centered on the topics of race and racism. They were asked to reflect on their experiences with race and be reflexive about their attitudes and beliefs. They engaged with multimodal, multidisciplinary texts that were meant to complicate their understanding of race and racism and equip them with language to talk about these two concepts. Over three months and forty-eight class sessions, students read, viewed, and listened to texts that explored the historical and contemporary meanings of race.

Participants

My students (all names are pseudonyms) for this study were a group of twenty-one ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse individuals from predominantly low-income or working-class backgrounds, who self-identified on my reading and writing survey as follows: Black/African American (Shanice, Yvette, Annysia); Anglo

Saxon/Italian American (Antonia, Frankie, Peter, Irina, Noah); Biracial (Harvey); Multiracial (Annette, Patrick); Latino/a (Jeremy, Denise, Raquel); Arab American (Abdul); Israeli American (Aaron); European/Russian-Jewish/Ukrainian (Sari, Alexa, Anna); Chinese/Asian (Shen-Li; Michael). Their ages ranged from eighteen to thirty years old.

Data Collection

I applied the case study method (Yin) and considered each student as a separate case within a multiple-case framework. Yin views the case study method as a comprehensive research strategy that incorporates specific methods of data collection, data analysis, and a plan for analysis. This method of qualitative research allows for an analysis over a period of time, giving the researcher the opportunity to study an individual, an institution, or a community and reveal their interactions and features (Berg). I studied my class as multiple cases (students) bounded within a single case (the FYC classroom). As the professor for the course, I was a participant observer. I had an active role in teaching the course while I observed my students' journey toward racial literacy. The data I collected consisted of students' responses to in-class writing assignments and activities, journal responses, freewriting exercises, a final presentation, extensive notes from my classroom observations, and an exit survey given on the last day of class. After each class, I wrote detailed notes in my research journal about what had been said during classroom discussions, capturing verbatim comments that had advanced, stagnated, or complicated the discourse that day. I analyzed their writing for prominent themes, paying particular attention to those texts that generated the largest number of inquiries and responses that went beyond stating what happened to the characters and revealed the students' reflexivity. I was particularly interested in understanding how, over a twelve-week period, the students engaged with the idea of racial literacy development. Based on the course structure, including how I assigned writing as it related to texts (multiple journal entries, daily writing for full presence,¹ or an essay-length discussion of a text), I observed that some texts yielded more robust data for my analysis than others.

Data Analysis

Two texts in particular, the documentary film "A Class Divided" (Peters) and the autobiography *An American Story* (Dickerson), provided the richest examples of students working toward racial literacy skills. Based on students' written responses, I argue that these two texts created more cognitive dissonance and frequently presented challenges or insights into the issues of race and racism. I organized the data into two major categories: Inquiries and Statements. I selected the words and phrases most frequently used (Maykut and Morehouse) as a method for establishing themes. I then counted the number of questions students asked—about the text and themselves—as well as the statements they made indicating how they understood the concepts of race or racism. I chunked phrases from student writings into each category to establish themes. An overall theme in the students' writing for

“A Class Divided” was the racial epiphany “this can happen to White people too”; for *An American Story*, the question of being colorblind was probed and repeatedly presented itself in the majority of student writings.

My primary interest in undertaking this study was to learn how students progressed (or regressed) in their development of racial literacy skills over the semester. This work represented a deeper look into research previously conducted and published on my FYC classroom. In a previous study, I had conducted an extensive analysis of all data collected that revealed *how* students progressed in their racial literacy through four recursive phases (Sealey-Ruiz). To examine an individual student’s racial literacy development as presented in his or her writing, I analyzed the themes using Miles and Huberman’s within-case and across-case method of data analysis.

Toward a Pedagogy of Racial Literacy in FYC

“This can happen to White people too”: Processing Racism through “A Class Divided”

During the semester of the study, my students engaged in learning about race. Two specific texts that generated a large volume of verbal feedback and evoked the most inquiry and engagement in their written assignments was a video clip from the *Frontline* documentary “A Class Divided” and the text *An American Story*. In 1968, the day after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jane Elliot, a third-grade teacher in Iowa conducted her “Blue-Eyed, Brown-Eyed” experiment with her students. She divided her students by their eye color, and for two days, depending on their eye color, each group was treated badly or given preferential treatment in class and during recess. On the third day, Elliot facilitated a discussion with her students about their experience. “A Class Divided” provides an example of an effective, yet controversial, way to teach children about racism and discrimination. As explained by Elliot in a 1970 interview following the WABC Eyewitness News story, “Eye of the Storm” (Peters, Beutel, and Elliott), which televised the experiment, her goal was to increase her students’ empathy for Black people and encourage a meaningful experience that could move them beyond “knowing” about inequality and oppression to “experiencing” them. Elliot’s approach to developing the racial literacy of her young students required them to take part in an experiment that would put them in “another’s shoes” and ask them to examine their own and society’s views of Black people. In doing so, Elliot not only taught them a valuable lesson about equity but also sought to increase their empathy for others.

I have used the film “A Class Divided” in my teaching for more than a decade. In the current study, after showing the documentary, I asked my students to freewrite their initial reactions. For homework, I asked them to build on their freewriting and write an essay that included some questions the documentary raised for them. My intention with this assignment was to shift the discussion away from Black people as victims. When students returned to class two days later, they

submitted their essays but insisted on talking about the film as a class. Antonia said:

This film really bothered me. First, it's kind of messed up how she did it to those kids, but I understand why she did it. Like, how would you explain what you're gonna do and then expect them to experience it? It would have changed it. I felt for them. I felt sorry for them, and then I thought to myself, wait, they had a chance to go back to being treated well. They are all White. Black people can't turn it off and on. They don't have a choice. Is it just me, or do other people feel like we need to talk about this? Can we talk about this, like now? (Researcher Log, 10/2006)

The hands of multiple students rose in the air. They agreed with Antonia about needing to talk about the film. While discourse about the film presented an excellent medium for analyzing the racial literacy of all my students, for this study I chose to focus on the writing of five students in particular: Antonia, Peter, Yvette, Frankie, and Harvey, as they used their writing to understand race and racism in their daily lives. At the start of her freewriting, Antonia wrote:

Can I believe what I just saw? Kids were separated because of their eye color and called lazy, from broken homes, and bad? What teacher would do something like that to her students? Where are the parents? Do they know this is happening? This is crazy.

Antonia's freewrite continued with her contempt for Elliott and her empathy for the White children. However, in her essay she began to address one of the specific questions I asked (What type of questions does the documentary raise for you?), Antonia wrote:

Maybe I am beginning to understand WHY she did this. It was to teach them a lesson. To let them know how it feels to be discriminated against. I am White and I don't know what that feels like. I wonder how Black people feel when they are treated badly just because they are Black? I wonder if the Black students in this class have been treated badly? If my professor has? I wonder if we'll ever get a chance to talk about such things? I wonder if they write about that in their journals?

The writing sample of Peter, a White male student who struggled all semester with my racial literacy curriculum, perhaps provides the most profound example of the way in which he was working out how he felt about racism and discrimination:

For the past five weeks we've been writing and talking about race, discrimination, racism. Everything we talk about, see, and read seems to have something to do with race and I was really beginning to get sick of it. For some reason, I think I'm getting it now. I think I'm getting what professor wants us to consider. The film really hit me hard. I felt sorry for the little White kids because they look like me, they look like my little brother, they look like the son I might have someday. Even now, writing about it, I'm kinda ashamed, because it's like I'm admitting that the only reason I am starting to understand racism and take interest is because I see how it can affect someone that looks like me. Does that make me a racist? I think so.

Yvette, an African American student, felt “relieved” after seeing the film, as she wrote:

Finally! Maybe now White people who view this film can get some idea about how Black people are made to feel when someone is racist towards them. Even though the kids got to be themselves again and loved by their teacher, at least for one day they felt what it is like to be despised because of what you look like. It’s good they were young. The younger to teach these lessons to, the better. My professor is asking me how I feel and what emotions are stirred in me? I feel relieved. I feel justified. I feel more human.

Although only portions of the students’ writing are presented here, their overall work is representative of the interrogation and processing that my class experienced as a result of viewing this documentary. The White students did not fall into the trap of using “White talk” (McIntyre), in which White people ignore the existence of race and racism and laugh the subjects away or refuse to engage with the topics. Instead, Antonia and Peter, as well as the other White students, began to interrogate Whiteness as an identity. In addition to classroom discourse (Rogers and Mosley, “Critical”), writing served as an invitation for students to look inward and begin to process how they felt about and understood the impact of racism in their world. Specifically, Antonia and Peter, two White students, questioned their lack of empathy for people of color and Black people in particular. Only when they were able to imagine Whites being treated badly because of a biological trait (eye color) did they take interest in the moral aspect of racism and the trauma that it can create. As we moved through the curriculum, “A Class Divided” was evoked in subsequent student writing. Processing the documentary through discussion and writing allowed students—White students in particular—the ability to generate language that describes the divisive and damaging elements of racism. For Yvette, viewing the documentary and the responses of her White peers relieved her from the burden that many Blacks feel of having to explain cultural issues and racist attitudes to Whites (Rogers and Mosley).

**“It’s hard to build racial literacy when you’re color-blind”:
The Desire to Move Beyond Race in *An American Story***

After the “A Class Divided” discussion and writing assignment, my class read Debra Dickerson’s autobiography *An American Story*. Dickerson’s book is a classic “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” story in which she admits that she often blamed Black people for their poverty. Only when she experiences injustice regarding a malfunctioning car she has purchased does she realize that being an officer in the US Air Force or having a Harvard law degree cannot protect her from racism and discrimination in the wider world. The journal writing of three students provides noteworthy examples of an attempt to put in practice the knowledge they learned about race and how racist systems operate in society. Frankie, a White male student, wrote in a weekly journal entry:

I used to think why everything had to be about race and was at first happy to finally read an African American talk about what THEY have to do to change their condition. And even someone like her, someone who is willing to look beyond race, and be colorblind, discovered that race does matter. . . . I think this book might be even as powerful as the documentary with the white kids in Iowa. She had a law degree, and served in the U.S. military and still had those horrible things happen to her, and even with her education, no one wanted to believe an African American when she told her story. I don't know how I would have felt if that happened to me.

Harvey, a biracial (Black and White) male student, discussed his struggle in his journal entry as follows:

So, I have a Black father and a White mother and everybody thinks I am Hispanic. I laugh sometimes, but my parents were clear on how they raised my sister and me. They told us that it doesn't matter what color you are, everyone is equal. I appreciate what the professor is doing, but it's hard to build racial literacy when you are taught to be color-blind. Sometimes it's painful to see race all the time, and then how do I choose? How do I hate one part of myself and love another? Am I supposed to? Dickerson is Black, but she didn't want to be labeled as Black, she just wanted to be herself. I understand why she felt that way. With being both Black and White, I just want to be seen as Harvey.

In a later journal entry, Harvey revisited his earlier entry after he read three additional chapters of the novel:

So I guess Debra isn't color-blind after-all. I wonder if anyone can ever really be? You almost have to be like an alien to not be racist. Everywhere you turn there is a book, or tv show, or an experience reminding you that race is how people see you in America.

Continuing this notion of the impossibility of color blindness, Yvette, an African American female, wrote in her final journal entry on *An American Story*:

I can't. I just can't take reading these depressing stories anymore. I'm tired that Black people can't get a break or a leg up. Even with a big degree, education, and all that she accomplished, guess why she had trouble getting people to believe her? Her race! Maybe it was her being a female too, but it was mostly her race. How foul.

Frankie's and Harvey's discovery that it is impossible to be color-blind was akin to Dickerson's realization that it is difficult for White people not to be racist. With each experience with injustice, Dickerson took note of how it made her feel and how she was changed by each event. For Harvey in particular, the weekly journals all my students were required to write over the two weeks they studied the book provided an opportunity for him to interrogate his color blindness—a directive from his parents—through his writing.

For Antonia, Peter, Frankie, Harvey, and Yvette, writing about their feelings toward race and the reality of racism and toward inequality impacted the way they saw their worlds—the world of their community college and the world they moved

through everyday. Frankie's comment, in the final essay for the semester, is most striking and perhaps the most concrete example of racial literacy development: "Yeah, I would say that I have racial literacy. I believe I had it before this class, but it was probably more like racial illiteracy. I'd like to take what I learn and make change, I'm just not exactly sure how I would do that."

Through a deliberate examination of race and racism in their writing, my White students began to deconstruct and actively challenge stereotypes about Blacks and other racialized minorities and became more empathetic to their marginalized standing in the world. In addition to the college's goal for the course—to elevate my students' writing skills to college-level status, my goals were twofold: to increase their knowledge about the social construction of race (Omi and Winant) and to grow their confidence in having discussions about race—in effect to increase their racial literacy skills.

A limitation of the study is that my students did not move to action—the next preferred step in racial literacy development. Racial literacy asks students take action once they have attained knowledge about injustice. This is an area of further exploration for FYC and other community college instructors who center writing and discourse on race and racism. It is possible that twelve weeks is not sufficient time to move students toward action. Instructors must consider the time as well as the exposures and experiences built into their FYC curriculum. It is also possible that age is a factor in racial literacy projects. Most research on racial literacy involves graduate students or teacher educators who are older than the first-year community college students who were in my study.

Implications for Community College FYC

Community college is the gateway to higher education for 45 percent of first-time freshmen (ACTE), but for an even greater proportion of people of color and poor or working-class students. Additionally, many of the students enrolled in community colleges are immigrants, some of whom are second language learners (Conway). The community college facilitates access to higher education for diverse groups regardless of language, race, ethnicity, age, or gender and includes individuals with weak academic skills and other characteristics that create barriers to further education (Bailey and Weininger). Thus, community colleges fulfill a unique role in the postsecondary educational landscape: they must provide developmental education programs for students who need remediation as well as educational curricula that meet the needs of students on various academic trajectories. More than 11.5 million students are enrolled in 1,195 community colleges nationwide. The majority of students are women (60 percent), and of these women, 46 percent are Black and an even larger percentage (55 percent) are Latina—a third of whom are low-income (AACC; Horn, Nevill, and Griffith). By focusing on racial literacy with FYC students, many who fit the descriptions listed above, this group will have an opportunity to discuss their current social realities and probe possibilities for their futures. While a number of community college professors teach FYC using a critical

approach, and scholars have argued for this method in first-year writing courses for decades (Gilyard; Peterson Welch), a lively debate continues about the extent to which critical issues like race and racism should be discussed in these courses.

Racial literacy skill building with FYC students invites them to assess and interrogate their attitudes about race as they write, read, and engage with a community of learners. Specifically for my students in my FYC course, writing provided an opportunity for those who were not yet comfortable talking about race in mixed-race settings. They found a platform from which to work out how they felt and what they believed and understood about race and racism as enacted in society and playing out in their lives. It is imperative that FYC professors recognize the need and accept the task of deliberately teaching critical dialogue and writing around issues of race and racism. To develop racial literacy skills in students, they must be willing to hold up their own experiences for confirmation and critique. This is an essential component of the racial literacy classroom. Of equally critical importance is the selection of multimodal (written, audio, video, digital) and multidisciplinary texts that facilitate the identification of stereotypes.

Concluding Thoughts

Literacy theorists have long argued that students construct knowledge by pooling from a variety of sources, and that education is meant to empower and lead to self-realization (Berthoff; Bizell). This argument, scholars maintain, has been extended to FYC courses. They extol the benefits of developing students into competent writers while moving them toward a more socially and politically conscious mindset by using the familiar subject of their lives—the events, beliefs, and choices that shape their world (Peterson Welch). In “Narrating Conflict,” Harkin criticizes the view of FYC courses as “service courses” that emphasize skills and drills (279). She advocates for students in FYC to have the opportunity to discover and develop their own stances on social and political topics and create their own opinions and understandings in relation to those topics.

In American society, one cannot escape the notion of race. Anyone who lives in American society for any period of time learns the ideology of race and racism. We are socialized into racial structures in our home, community, and school settings. For most people, talking about race is very difficult. America has had a troubled history concerning race and particular groups in our society. Even with the historic election of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States, Americans continue to realize that they are not yet post-racial.

First-year composition classrooms usually include members from underrepresented groups in society who are affected by racism. It is crucial for FYC educators to realize that any reluctance on their part to engage students in a discourse around race and racism does not minimize the reality that young people live with the effects of racism daily. It is important for our FYC students to read literature that explicitly includes themes and topics related to race and racism (I also extend this argument to the issue of class and gender), so that they may probe their beliefs

and practices and recognize that racism directly opposes the concept of equality for all Americans. First-year composition courses can be safe places where students connect reading, writing, and inquiry about themselves and their world and discover ways to bring about necessary change.

To effectively teach using a pedagogy of racial literacy requires courage and a moral consensus on the power of race and racism in our lives. Racial literacy helps our students “come to understand the crippling effects of race and racism on our entire social, economic, and political order” (Guinier 117) and recognize the importance of writing and talking in ways that create possibilities for personal and social change. Increasing the racial literacy skills of our students validates that “race matters not just for blacks, in other words, but for every citizen of the United States” (Guinier 117). Moving toward a pedagogy of racial literacy in FYC is not just a good way to teach—it is a *just* way to teach. 

Note

1. Inspired by Peter Elbow’s “freewriting” activity, I created “Writing For Full Presence” (WFFP), an unstructured or guided writing activity at the start of each class. The goal is to get down in writing what is on the students’ minds that might keep them from being “fully present” in the classroom community. Sharing is optional. In a safe classroom community, I have found that students are willing to share their private thoughts captured in WFFP and often shared them in FYC. Their writing was usually about a racist incident they witnessed and how they were processing it.

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