

Beyond Crisis Moments: Mediating Instructor-Student Conflict through Anti-Racist Practice

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Recently, a busy semester was complicated by the same appeal from multiple instructors: *Help me with this unresponsive or confrontational student*. As WPAs, we support our instructors facing this common student-teacher conflict by helping them figure out how to productively manage feelings of defensiveness when encountering resistant students. However, we noticed a pattern. In most cases, the instructor was a white woman and the student a person of color, almost always a man, mirroring the demographics of our program and college: a public urban institution with a majority-minority student population and mostly white teaching faculty.

As BIPOC WPAs, we've endured our own micro- and macro-aggressions that inform our complex reactions to such conflicts. Years ago, Chris' student announced during class: *It's a fact that Black people are more criminal*. Though immediate denouncement would have been justified, Chris wondered what had led this usually respectful student to confidently share a racist statement in the presence of a Black professor. Chris had just concluded a mini-lesson on weak claims using the example of a homeowner who believed that "Black people are thieves" after being once robbed by a Black person—the student's outburst, though problematic, had not come out of nowhere. After regaining his composure, Chris felt confident enough to abandon his planned lesson and teach from this charged moment. He guided the class to interrogate the evidence, reasoning, and warrants underpinning the student's claim, and worked with them to identify possible counter-arguments to expose its speciousness. This productive experience informs how Chris wants our instructors to approach these conflicts: lead with genuine curiosity, resist assuming ill intent, and consider what might have led the student to that moment.

In these ways, we bring our own histories and positionalities to our WPA work. When Amy once mediated a session between a scared instructor and "hostile" student, she immediately felt a shift in her understanding when the emergent bilingual student expressed frustration about communicating effectively in English. Hostility from the perspective of the instructor was likely the student's attempt to be assertive when he felt powerless about a grade, questioning whether he, as a racialized student with a perceived accent, was being fairly seen and heard by the instructor, a cis white woman. Yet, Amy also recognized how gender dynamics created an intimi-

dating situation for the instructor, a first-year graduate student. Amy's perspective was informed by her own language-brokering experiences in an immigrant family, by seeing those kinds of language struggles up close, and by her own past experiences teaching as a young woman. Our histories provide us with insights that complicate common assumptions about "trouble students." At the same time, we are conscious that our own positionalities could make our mediations seem biased or "racially charged," that we could be seen as siding with students and not supporting contingent faculty.

As WPAs, we knew our program could not effectively address instructors' biases around race, gender, age, and language use during the immediate crisis moments of student-teacher conflicts. We needed to address them in more systematic and sustainable ways, but "How?" and "When?" were complicated by the labor conditions of our primarily contingent instructors and our non-existent budget to compensate for faculty development. Instead, we implemented implicit bias training where we were already guaranteed audiences—as part of new instructor orientation and the practicum. We've also worked to integrate these questions around bias and linguistic justice into all of our program policies and activities, including our recent assessment.

Despite our limited ability as administrators to "solve" deeply ingrained biases, our obligation was to minimize immediate harm to students. So, drawing on institutional resources, we worked with our campus Center for Ethnic, Racial and Religious Understanding. Having a diversity education center with experience building equity through "dialogue and undoing bias techniques" was vital as we strategized to support our instructors. Through deliberations about various scenarios like the ones we discussed above and within more typical faculty development sessions about assessment or facilitating class discussion, we created opportunities for instructors to rehearse moments of high-stakes conflict in lower-stakes spaces and learn about the practices of "listening and understanding with resilience," "recognizing our own social positionality," and differentiating between "safety and comfort" (CERRU). The goal? To help instructors reflect on and ethically inhabit their power in the classroom. Such training obviously cannot undo larger systems of racism and white language supremacy in educational spaces. But they can encourage instructors to anticipate how they might respond equitably in the classroom. Our approach attempts to reduce potential injury to students and underscores the importance of this work to our program, while we continue to make related structural, curricular, and policy changes.

By acknowledging our own complex responses here, we worry that instructors might hesitate to come to us. But looking at this problem straight-

on is exactly what is needed to acknowledge how these implicit biases emerge in the classroom. In our case, we confront systemic racism and work towards linguistic justice in the face of our own positionalities and the overwhelming need for and challenge of doing such deep work with new contingent faculty.

All of these truths—the racialization of students, the exploitation of part-time instructors, the gendered experiences with authority in the classroom—can exist simultaneously. Our goal is not to accuse our instructors of privileges and biases but instead to provide space, policy, and tools for necessary and possibly uncomfortable acknowledgement and self-reflection, which allows for conversations that are more whole.

WORKS CITED

CERRU. “Introduction to Resolving Conflict and Addressing Bias in the Classroom.” (workshop materials) First Year Writing Instructor Orientation, May 2018.

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