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# Learning to Write in Writing Centers: The Racial Experiences of Two Mexican Students



## Abstract

This article examines racist discourses and how they operate within writing centers. The data presented emerged from qualitative interviews that were conducted with two participants. In theorizing the data gathered from Mexican American students about their writing center experiences, the author applies a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit lens to conceptualize how issues of race appear within writing centers. The article concludes with suggestions for anti-racist practices in writing centers and classrooms.

*Keywords:* writing centers, racist discourses, critical race theory, Latina and Latino critical race theory, writing

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While recent high-profile shootings that resulted in the deaths of African American youth Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown have brought attention to tragic instances of racial profiling, most people would agree that a school setting is an unlikely place to find racism, especially among those who are educators. In contrast to this general assumption about schools, this article focuses on the racial discourses that exist at some universities and more specifically, within writing centers. The goal of this project is to examine how racist discourses function within writing centers and thus contradict the ideas of scholars like Stephen North (1984) who writes that the main goal of writing centers should not be to improve writing, but to improve the writer. This research is needed because although most writing centers improve the writer and therefore improve writing, this type of writing favors the White European American (WEA) standard at the expense of the cultural and linguistic practices of minorities. Throughout this research, I apply Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit to conceptualize how issues of race operate within writing centers.

The guiding questions for this project are: (1) Do racist discourses operate within writing centers? If so, how do they operate within them?, (2) How do racist discourses manifest?, and (3) How do racist discourses affect Mexican American students?

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## Theoretical Perspective

As a way to critically examine the role of race in writing centers, I apply Critical Race Theory (CRT) to this research project. CRT critically examines race relations within everyday practices in different settings, including universities. CRT scholars argue that addressing critical issues of racism in the United States helps people understand the multiple dimensions of racism as well as minimizes the pervasiveness of racism. CRT, which emerged in the field of law, has provided great utility in other academic fields, including the field of education, where it is applied to classroom dynamics, testing, tracking, accountability, curriculum bias, and pedagogy.

The basis of CRT is that “racism” is normalized in U.S. society—so much so that it often goes unnoticed. CRT also contends that racism is so embedded in American culture that it is no longer viewed as racism and instead is identified as common daily discourse that appears everywhere. Furthermore, CRT scholars believe racist discourses surround us and operate through us in the everyday discourses we produce. In hoping to define racism, Delgado and Stefanci (2001) write:

Racism is not a mistake, nor a matter of episodic, irrational behavior carried out by vicious-willed individuals, not a throwback of a long gone era. It is a ritual assertion of supremacy, like animals sneering and posturing to maintain their places in the hierarchy of the colony. It is performed largely unconsciously, just as the animals’ behaviors are. Racism seems right, customary, and inoffensive to those engaged in it, while also bringing them psychic and pecuniary advantages. (p. 213)

Stemming from CRT is a relatively new and evolving field called “LatCrit.” Unlike CRT that generally focuses on issues of race and its effects on society, “LatCrits” focus on how race and racism affects Latina/os. In doing this, LatCrits open up the critical analysis to include issues of language both written and oral, thereby addressing issues of bilingual students and the racism they face because of their language use in English, Spanish, or both (code-switching). Drawing from the CRT framework, LatCrits have also extensively written on how race is not a biological trait but instead is socially constructed (Delgado & Stefanci, 2001, p. 7), and thus it is believed that “nobody is born a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1989) nor “[is someone] born a Negro” (Gates, 1993). Similarly, no one is born white. From this perspective, LatCrits believe that people either have or lack power because of the “virtue of the social context in which one finds oneself, to be sure, but also by virtue of the choices one makes” (Haney-Lopez, 2006, p. 134). In explaining this, LatCrits, like CRT scholars, believe power and privileges are given to individuals simply because of the way they look, the language they speak, and those with whom they associate themselves. I apply a LatCrit framework to my research because it provides me the lens to critically analyze my data while focusing on how issues of race affect Latino students.

## Writing Center History

The first glimpse of writing centers appeared within the 18<sup>th</sup>-century literary societies, which were spaces where university students conversed and studied. Traditional writing centers (as we would identify them today) did not appear within universities until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and did not become professionally recognized until the 1970s (Rudolph, 1990).

There are three main reasons why writing centers were founded: outgrowths of classroom remediation, support for writing across the curriculum programs, and spaces for writing (Rudolph, 1990). The earliest writing centers were identified as labs or clinics and were conceived as extensions of the writing classroom. These early labs/clinics commonly relied on cassette players with headphones, skill and drill worksheets, and other individualized task work. As more labs/clinics opened during the 1970s and 1980s, they began to be called “writing centers” and were described as provocative, ideal writing and thinking spaces (Rudolph, 1990).

Although writing centers often viewed themselves as ideal in writing and thought, university rhetoric commonly did not view them as such and instead marginalized them as remediation centers. Stephen North (1984) has written about the university’s ignorance on writing centers and how they are commonly viewed as “fix-it shops” or as “giving first aid and treating symptoms” (p. 88).

To help reach a university goal, which is for students to learn to write well (often defined within the parameters of WEAs), writing centers commonly tutor students in a way that complements this goal. In writing centers, as in writing classrooms, and like most educational settings, tutors often adopt a colorblind or otherwise race neutral perspective, reiterating the sentiment that race has no place in the writing center (Barron & Grimm, 2002). For some writing tutors, to see race is to reinforce a racist social system that has historically marginalized people of color and given unfair advantages to WEAs in our society. In their attempt to give every student equal footing in the writing center, many tutors posit that they do not see race, claiming that it does not matter if a student is “green, white, or red” (Grimm, 1999).

Unfortunately, tutors’ inattention to issues of race perpetuates a system that is defined by racist discourses and practices. For example, Nancy Grimm (1999) writes:

Many universities and many writing centers operate under an autonomous model of literacy, and many approaches to teaching composition are still strongly autonomous, focused on literacy as an individual attribute with little acknowledgement of mainstream values and authority structures that are carried in academic literacy practices. (p. 45)

This autonomous view of literacy is something that the university expects its departments and student centers to follow. It can be argued that this autonomous view of literacy contributes to an acculturation process in the university. Scholars like Victor

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When writing tutors adopt a colorblind approach to teaching writing, the ways in which “neutral” pedagogical practices privilege white students and marginalize students of color remain unexamined (Barron and Grimm, 2002).

Villanueva (2006) agree and claim that acculturation is driven by essentialist hegemonic and academic discourses that are universal, empowering, and construct truth. Acculturation, therefore, serves to validate academic culture. Thus, when students attend the writing center, it is expected they will be tutored in English and that the tutor will follow university standards.

Aside from the WEA academic standards that are often set in writing centers, there are various ways WEA cultural norms surface in writing centers, including their everyday operating practices. For example, writing centers are often described as “homely spaces” (McKinney, 2005, p. 16). In this sense, writing centers are often set up to mirror a home. But whose home does it resemble? It is not the Mexican American home wherein children likely grew up reading *Kaliman*, listening to Vicente Fernandez, and eating *buñuelos*. Instead, writing centers often reflect homes where individuals grew up reading Shakespeare, listening to Mozart, and eating brownies. As McKinney (2005) notes, these homes are the white middle class homes: “Calling oneself comfortable [in the writing center] is a way of aligning with mainstream values” (p. 16).

This blindness to racism, often referred to as colorblindness (Villanueva, 2006), is not new and simply follows U.S. dominant culture rhetoric. Even though colorblindness advocates for a merit-based system of reward, it rarely works to the advantage of people of color. The fact is, not everybody is the same as the colorblind logic professes. Rather, students bring different cultural, linguistic, and racial experiences into the writing classroom and writing centers. Ironically, adopting a colorblind lens does not mean that all differences are rendered mute. Rather, a colorblind perspective usually translates into classroom and writing center practices that build upon and bestow neutral WEA students’ cultural, linguistic, and racial knowledge. Thus, well-intentioned tutors who adopt a colorblind perspective often (re)produce rhetorics/practices that center on unstated WEA cultural practices and the English language as the norm, all the while discrediting the cultural, racial, and linguistic experiences of students of color. When writing tutors adopt a colorblind approach to teaching writing, the ways in which “neutral” pedagogical practices privilege white students and marginalize students of color remain unexamined (Barron & Grimm, 2002).

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected on two students, Luis and Laura, using qualitative interviews, which consisted of unstructured and open-ended questions to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2014). These two students were chosen because they had made it apparent that they had encountered racist acts against them by a professor and/or at the writing center. Wanting to further learn about their experiences in writing centers, I decided to interview Luis and Laura about their experiences at their writing centers.

During this data collection process, I interviewed the two participants a minimum of five times at a local coffee shop. The first interview focused on their family history. During this time, I provided Luis and Laura ample opportunities to discuss any major family events. The second and third interviews focused more on their academic experiences. I was particularly interested in learning how they were doing in their current classes. During this interview, I provided them a “safe space” to talk about any issues they might have had with a professor. The fourth and fifth interviews focused on their writing center experiences. In these interviews, I asked them to elaborate on their experiences at their writing centers.

### Luis

Luis is a 21-year-old college junior (with a 3.5 GPA) who identifies as a Mexican American. Luis was born and raised in Texas. In high school, Luis pushed himself to excel academically in all subjects. Once in college, Luis continued to do the same, but he gave a particularly strong effort in his writing classes because he felt that these classes would play a key role in the success of his other classes. As a result of this practice, he often excelled in his writing assignments, which resulted in his becoming a confident college writer. Yet, when he enrolled in a literature course, his literature professor told him that he was not a good writer. Although he was not insulted by the comment, he was disturbed by the way the professor told him. Luis elaborated:

Dr. Bush told me I needed to improve my writing. When I asked him specifically on what he did not like about my writing, he said that I wrote the way I spoke. He said that I often misspelled words and used incorrect grammar. When I asked him when I did this, he responded by saying that I did it all the time. I was a bit surprised by his comments because I had never been told I was a bad writer.

In hopes of receiving a better grade in his literature class, Luis followed Dr. Bush’s advice and visited the writing center. According to Luis, when he first entered the writing center, he felt uncomfortable, which seemed triggered by the power discrepancy that existed within the writing center. Most of the tutors were WEAs while many of the students being tutored were students of color. He said, “It is weird and hard to explain. Most of the tutees looked like me, while most of the tutors did not.” He

further added, “When I first walked in, it seemed like everyone stopped and looked at me. A few seconds passed before the receptionist asked me what class I needed to be tutored for.” When Luis responded that it was for his literature class, the receptionist assigned him to “Kat,” whom he described as a confident 24-year-old woman.

When I asked Luis if Kat was a good tutor, he replied “yes” and then elaborated. “The first time I met Kat, she tore up my paper. She started asking questions like, who is your audience and what is the goal of your paper—all kinds of stuff that I had never heard before.” As the semester progressed, he continued to visit her. However, she began to change. Unlike the initial relationship he had with Kat, she began to show what he felt were signs of racism. Luis vividly remembers one comment that Kat made to him: “You don’t make the type of mistakes that many Mexican students make. Your writing is ok, but still needs work. These mistakes are probably caused because you heard Spanish growing up.” Although he never confronted her, he was surprised by her comment because he grew up in an English-speaking, not a Spanish-speaking, household.

By applying a CRT/LatCrit lens to these data, and therefore being especially sensitive to issues of race and ethnicity, it is clear that racist discourses operate at different levels within this writing center. In Luis’s case, he attended the writing center because his professor Dr. Bush told him he could not write well. More importantly, through his actions, Dr. Bush had provided an atmosphere for Luis that was not inviting. According to Luis, he felt that Dr. Bush did not like him despite his valiant effort in trying to establish a relationship with Dr. Bush. According to Luis, he was an active student, attempted to talk to the professor after class, and often visited his office hours, thus following the protocol of a good student, but to his surprise, Dr. Bush was not interested in establishing a relationship with him.

Had Dr. Bush spent more time explaining to Luis his reasoning for suggesting the writing center, and had his demeanor been friendlier towards Luis, then perhaps Luis would have felt less attacked by his teacher’s actions. But since Dr. Bush did not behave in this manner, Luis interpreted Dr. Bush’s acts as racist. According to Luis, Kat (his writing tutor) also participated in racist discourses. Since Luis has some physical features that are stereotypically assumed that some Mexicans possess (dark skin, black hair, small stature), she likely believed that he was raised speaking Spanish, even though he was not. In making this assumption, she embraced the racist discourse that associates Spanish speakers with poor literacy skills.

## Laura

My second participant, Laura, is a Mexican American woman who has a strong connection to both her Mexican and American cultures and was enrolled at a small university in Texas. Laura’s parents did not teach her Spanish when she was young because they felt doing so would negatively impact her education. This is a common practice among Mexican Americans who have been adversely affected by the negative connotation of knowing Spanish and by the more recent English Only movement (Haver, 2013).

According to Laura, she faced many types of disadvantages that ranged from the lack of formal family education to economics. For example, since her parents held only an eighth-grade education, they could help her only minimally with her schoolwork. Additionally, her family was working class and they never could afford to buy a personal computer for the home. Since Laura did not have some of the tools that were used to identify successful students, she felt she needed to find alternative ways that would identify her as successful. For example, Laura felt that she was not a good writer, so she believed that attending the writing center could make her a better writer. Determined to become an exceptional writer, Laura visited the writing center at least once a week. Laura tells me, “At Snow University, almost all the tutors were Mexican. They were cool and always helped me with my writing. They also understood my culture so they never disrespected me.” Throughout her entire undergraduate years, Laura continued to work hard on her writing. As she became older, she befriended many of the tutors, who eventually became part of her social network. With her hard work and determination, Laura’s writing problems were minimized. In fact, in her senior year, the writing center director asked her if she wanted to be a writing tutor. Not wanting to lose her academic focus, she refused the job offer, but she knew she wanted to pursue this position in graduate school.

According to Laura, as soon as she was accepted into graduate school at Sycamore University, a few hundred miles from where she had received her undergraduate degree, she obtained a job as a writing tutor. To Laura’s surprise, the writing center at Sycamore University was much different than the one she had attended at Snow University. She noted, “Everyone at this writing center was white.” When I asked her to explain this, she told me that most of the tutors were WEAs and were heavily invested in their whiteness. She explained, “When I tried talking to them about something culturally, outside of tutoring sessions, they seemed uninterested.”

During our interview, Laura mentioned that once she tried to talk to her fellow tutors about HR 4437 (a bill passed by Congress titled “Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005”). As she attempted to have a conversation with one particular tutor, the tutor responded that she did not know much about HR 4437, but she did think that illegals needed to learn English or be deported. Laura explained to me that this comment was especially insulting because even with little knowledge about HR 4437, the tutor was confident enough to say Mexicans deserve to be deported.

Other racist discourses emerged at this writing center, including when Laura heard a tutor mention that she could not believe that her Mexican American student (tutee) wanted to be called Jorge and not George. The tutor stated, “I could not understand why he wants to be called Jorge. No one can pronounce it correctly, so if he wants us to mispronounce his name all the time, then fine. It just doesn’t make sense.”

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Teachers should specifically be respectful of minority dialects, emphasizing to students that there are many variations of English. Equally important, teachers should also teach students the importance of code-switching. In doing this, the teacher can teach students the value of their home language, while also teaching them the value of standardized English, which is expected in most school settings.

Applying a CRT and LatCrit framework to these data illustrates how racist discourses commonly surfaced in Laura's educational experiences within a writing center. Through Laura's examples, it is clear that some WEA tutors buy into the dominant discourses concerning Mexican American culture, which became evident in the various HR 4437 conversations that Laura shared with me. Further complicating this process, there were instances when the writing tutors invited Laura to participate in racist discourses against Mexican Americans, as in the case when the tutor did not understand why her student wanted to be called Jorge, not George.

### Conclusion

Both Luis's and Laura's data reveal that racist discourses exist within these two writing centers. It is important to realize that writing centers are not the sole producers of racist discourse and that in reality, racial discourses permeate K-12 educational settings, as in state-mandated tests where standard English is a requirement.

As a way to manage tensions between anti-racist teaching practices and getting students to pass state-mandated tests, high school teachers may consider adopting a dual agency, or what Lisa Delpit (2006) refers to as "playing the game." More specifically, teachers can teach the skills needed to succeed academically while also promoting a social justice perspective, wherein students are critical of the very system they must be successful in. Teachers should specifically be respectful of minority dialects, emphasizing to students that there are many variations of English. Equally important, teachers should also teach students the importance of code-switching. In doing this, the teacher can teach students the value of their home language, while also teaching them the value of standardized English, which is expected in most school settings.

Writing center tutors/teachers must also be involved in this activist approach to teaching writing. Writing tutors/teachers

need to acknowledge the existence of racist discourses that exist within universities and K-12 schools. This is not to say that the individuals working in writing centers are necessarily racist, but rather that racist discourses function regardless of individual intention (i.e., the dominant language spoken, the composition of individuals of power within these environments, the art being displayed, the music being played, etc.). It is crucial to acknowledging the presence of racist discourses, because only then can the problem be recognized and consciously avoided.

Writing centers/tutors/teachers of writing must also be truly vested in creating a multicultural society. Perhaps the most common "safe activity" that most educators do is adopt a multicultural literature book, but it is important to be much more active. When it comes to writing, tutors and teachers of writing must encourage students of color to learn how to code-switch effectively. That is, the students should learn that their own dialect and second language are respected commodities of their lives, but within the academy their dialect is not considered acceptable, and therefore they must learn to write solely in standardized American English.

Writing centers/tutors/teachers need to be critical of their pedagogical styles of teaching. In most cases, teachers/tutors have been trained to praise the more active (assertive) student in the classroom, which again commonly benefits WEA students. Unfortunately, most students of color have faced many different obstacles in their educational paths that have caused them to be more cautious (which is often interpreted as passive) in their classroom. Noting this, it is critical for writing centers/tutors/teachers to recognize this common practice and therefore not punish the nonassertive student because often he/she is simply practicing a cultural practice that he/she has learned.

It is important for educators to realize that despite these suggestions, and others like them, racism is a complex entity that is consistently being produced in our society, so it is nearly impossible to eradicate racism entirely. At best, we can try to minimize it by acknowledging its existence and consequently attempt to cripple it at every opportunity.

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