

Course Design

English 150: Writing as Inquiry—Explorations of Identity and Privilege

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Course Description

This unit, “Explorations of Identity and Privilege,” was designed for first year writing courses at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) taught in 2015 and 2016. The course as a whole focused on writing and inquiry. Within this unit, students discussed essays relating to different forms of privilege (e.g. racial, gender, class) and explored their relationship to privilege in a final unit paper. Student writing emphasized self-awareness of how components of their identities—and the identities of others—are rewarded or penalized within their sociocultural environment. While students might be aware of their privilege(s) or lack thereof on some level, reading and discussing essays written by others helped students critically examine their personal experiences within a larger conversation.

Institutional Context

Our experience teaching this unit occurred at UNL, a land-grant institution. The undergraduate community at UNL is overwhelmingly white with the university documenting that in fall 2015, only 13.7% of the undergraduate population was non-white (“Undergraduate Enrollment”). Additionally, the university shows an undergraduate enrollment of roughly 50-55% male to 44-49% female depending on class standing (first year, sophomore, etc.) (“Enrollment”). In 2015, 27% of the entering first year class consisted of first generation students, according to Academic Affairs at UNL. Overall, the majority of students at UNL are from Nebraska, encompassing the more urban communities of Lincoln and Omaha, as well as small farming communities throughout the state. First year students made up the majority of both of our classes with a few sophomores in each section.

Theoretical Rationale

The topic of social privilege² is a hot-button issue at many US colleges and universities. Nationwide conversations sparked by the deaths of Trayvon Martin (2012), Eric Garner (2014), Sandra Bland (2015), and the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName movements at the time, among others, led us to consider our own privileges. Additionally, social justice con-

cerns related to the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within society motivated us to design and implement a unit about “Explorations of Identity and Privilege” in our writing classrooms. Such conversations did not seem to happen in our classrooms or, to a degree, on our campus; however, as graduate TAs in our first semesters of teaching in 2015, we also felt unprepared to discuss these incidents directly with our students. We realized that this ability to avoid direct discussions of these incidents was a form of privilege in itself and part of the reason we designed and implemented this unit was to educate ourselves. We hoped to learn alongside our students. Examining issues of identity and privilege allow both students and teachers to contribute to social justice work by unpacking the ways in which individual identities shape access to economic, social, or political power.

Increased attention to the topic of social privilege appears in a variety of departments’ course curricula, including psychology (see Boatright-Horowitz et al.; Williams and Malchiori; Platt), sociology (see Messner), ethnic studies, women’s, gender, and sexuality studies (see Ferber and O’Reilly Herrera; Case), law (Armstrong and Wildman), cultural studies, and diversity-themed courses (Case and Cole) to name a few, and pedagogical articles on teaching privilege in these disciplines are cropping up with increasing frequency.³ In composition studies, scholars have written about bringing topics such as difference, whiteness, race, class, gender, and sexuality into the composition classroom (e.g. see Winans; Kynard; Moss; Grobman; Waite). This existing composition scholarship presents the pedagogical affordances to engaging specific identity intersections. Our focus is less on specific facets of identity (e.g. race, class, gender, sexuality) than it is on the relative privileges resulting from an individual’s personal identity constellation. Here, our reflections on teaching a unit focused on privilege and identity are informed by these interdisciplinary conversations about privilege and those about intersectionality in composition studies.

A unit on privilege accomplishes several important tasks that forward the development of writers, such as developing research skills, articulating claims, and understanding the rhetorical concepts of audience, purpose, and context. In addition, students practice engaging with and conducting self-reflection and analysis of their own lived experiences in connection with larger social issues through in-class discussions and reflective writing activities. Furthermore, this unit tasks students with fairly and ethically representing themselves and others, as well as developing an awareness of how they present themselves and others as a rhetorical choice.⁴ Overall, this unit works to foster habits of mind,⁵ particularly curiosity, openness, creativity, responsibility, and metacognition. The writing classroom provides space for students to think critically about their personal interactions with others, the voices they’re engaging, and the rhetoric

they are surrounded by through the traditional rhetorical triad of audience, purpose, and context.

Our unit particularly fosters openness and responsibility, habits necessary for discussing topics related to social justice. As part of the unit, we present students with the written testimonies of writers whose lived experiences might differ widely from their own in hopes of broadening students' worldviews. We create a classroom environment where students are exposed to the lived experiences of their classmates through the ways we ask students to engage in class discussions and writings. Establishing this environment necessarily supplements the unit's core readings by providing a personal connection to the material. The unit also promotes responsibility by requiring students to think critically about how their everyday actions resonate within their local, national, and even global communities. Not only do students consider how sociocultural forces shape their identities, but they also explore how their actions collectively shape society and culture. This unit fosters critical thinking, or "the ability to analyze a situation or text and make thoughtful decisions based on that analysis" that particularly exposes students to "examining assumptions about the texts [we encounter] held by different audiences" as practiced through a combination of in-class discussions and reflective writing activities ("Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing").

Critical Reflection

In this critical reflection, we start by first reflecting on our distinct subject positions, which directly impact our varied approaches to teaching this unit. Both of us identify as able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender women. However, we each hold additional distinguishing identity markers. Specifically, Brita teaches as a white, middle-class, American woman, whereas Ashanka teaches as a first-generation-to-college Indian American woman and child of immigrants. Because her race is embodied through her visible appearance and traditional name, these identity traits are physically revealed to students upon her entrance into her composition classroom. In what follows, we reflect on our individual experiences teaching this unit and key takeaways. We conclude with our collective takeaways and thoughts for how we would retool this unit for future teaching.

Moving Past Single Stories: Ashanka Reflects

By including a unit on privilege in my first year writing class in Spring 2015, I hoped to develop critical awareness alongside students. Specifically, I wanted students to inquire into their own privileges and consider how they manifest regularly in their lives. I also wanted to encourage students to begin to

understand how their upbringings, backgrounds, and occupations manifest themselves and to reflect on their ideologies in meaningful ways.

One of the strongest aspects of this unit, and perhaps key, came from introducing these conversations with Chimamanda Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story." Adichie's talk provided students with vocabulary they could refer back to throughout our discussions such as the concept of a "single story" of a person or group of people, which she argues creates misconceptions when taken as the only story (Adichie). This grounding offered a valuable starting point for forthcoming conversations about representation, writing, and identity. Also, this foregrounding allowed us to have discussions about how to ethically and accurately represent larger cultural and racial communities.

I acknowledged with students that while fairly engaging our own and others' identities can often be challenging, we should approach the unit with honesty and not be afraid to take risks in developing our questions for class discussions and in writing essays for the unit. To offer students a space for taking such risks, I employed the "fishbowl" discussion strategy as a means of creating a lower-stakes environment for a high-stakes discussion by having students work from anonymity to small and large group contexts when sharing their thoughts in response to the core unit texts ("Fishbowl"). In the classroom, I asked students to form a fishbowl space in which four students create a small inner circle of desks with the remaining students in a larger outside circle. Students in the large outside circle are not allowed to speak, following fishbowl rules, unless they are tapped by the facilitator (teacher) or voluntarily tap themselves into the center of the fishbowl to exchange with other students in the center. Through this pedagogical approach, I could gauge students' comprehension of the text and guide the overall discussion as needed, as well as having all students actively participate in both speaking and listening roles. After engaging in the fishbowl and working through several questions for a good part of the class session, I asked students to take a few minutes and write about the questions that remained from those submitted prior to class as well as any concepts that excited or frustrated them from the discussion. Later, in the author's notes accompanying their final unit essays, several students noted that the writing they did during these moments was helpful for drafting the ideas they developed in their projects.

Offering an invitation for students to take risks from the beginning alongside a practice of asking for questions ahead of time helped facilitate discussions of complex topics such as privilege, race, class, and identity. Prior to class, students were asked to read one of the key texts and email questions to me that could foster discussion that I would then compile into a PowerPoint and present without tying any student names to questions to create space for risk taking. For instance, students asked both general questions about terms

such as “why [Roxane] Gay feel[s] like everyone needs to accept that they have privilege, and what accepting it would accomplish” to think about the value of such reflection. Or questions about content such as “why Anzaldúa uses a mix of Spanish and English throughout her piece” that opened up conversations about language-use in writing and culture. Students seemed more willing to bring up topics that they might not otherwise for fear or anxiety of how they would be perceived by their peers. Additionally, having students, rather than the teacher, develop the questions for discussion helped ensure the content of the questions was meeting the students’ level of understanding and interest. However, this practice took more time in regard to course preparation since I sometimes needed to trim down questions for length or time as well as organize them by topic in the PowerPoint to help the flow of discussion. One thing I would revise in the future is the format and method by which students submit questions. Further, if teaching this three-to-four-week unit as a semester-long theme and/or online, I imagine focusing questions around more specific topics or changing the format would benefit future discussions.

Students did not greet this discussion strategy with open arms. In each class, it seemed the same few students—those who typically participated in every class—would volunteer quickly to be at the center of the fishbowl circle, while others tried to take a spot on the outside of the circle and only participate when called on. However, over time as students got more used to this form, more students would voluntarily tap themselves into the discussion and contribute their feelings on the question at hand. At times, I would mention my personal connections to authors’ positions as one way to connect further with students. For instance, while teaching Gloria Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” I noted that I grew up in a multilingual household and Anzaldúa’s movement among dialects reflected similarly in my household across Hindi, Punjabi, and English. Likewise, I noted that students with shared backgrounds reflected in the readings were likely to volunteer to go first on those particular discussion days. For instance, when we discussed David Sedaris’ “Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities,” a queer-identified student volunteered to go first; this happened similarly with Latinx-identified students when discussing Anzaldúa. For me, this level of engagement further emphasizes the need for incorporating more intersectional voices in future classrooms—if we only teach white, male authors, for instance, we risk continually privileging, giving agency to, and, thus, often only hearing these voices in the classroom. This discussion model worked to get more conversations happening regarding issues of privilege, race, and identity, but it took a few repetitions of the model before students seemed to feel comfortable participating in speaking roles without my tapping them in.

Overall, the in-class activities along with the readings worked together toward guiding students to transition into brainstorming essay projects. Several

students' writing projects stemmed from connections they had written about during in-class fishbowl discussions. The culminating project for this unit was a 6-8 page personal narrative essay. Students were asked to identify and describe a moment or scene that illustrated an example of privilege in their lives, interpret that privilege within a greater context such as their culture, community, or family life, and connect these moments to ideas from one or more of the six key essays taught during this unit. This project blended the concept of the personal narrative essay with critical analysis. I encouraged students to take risks in their writing, as the process of writing drafts with peer review offers opportunities for feedback for students to continue to build their writing. While this project asked students to consider outside voices, the focus of the essay was on the student's narrative with the additional essays serving as support and/or a way to create further points of inquiry into the student's own identities and privileges. Ultimately, students wrote about experiences ranging from growing up as a child of immigrants to how getting a specific tattoo gave her an outsider status within family and home community. The majority of the students in this class pointed to this unit as a moment of both tension and triumph in end-of-semester reflection essays. Specifically, students felt challenged by the texts assigned in the unit, but several noted that this project was among their favorite written pieces because they were able to articulate their concerns and consider what shapes their privileges and identities. Despite limiting the number of readings and scope of the unit, I quickly discovered that the work of this unit could easily encompass an entire course on privilege and identity. When teaching this unit again in the future, I would modify it to include more connections to current events for students to consider alongside our discussions.

Cultivating Compassion and Embracing Vulnerability: Brita Reflects

My primary motivation for teaching a unit on privilege in first year composition was to foster students' compassion for others while developing essential academic writing skills. However, I wanted this compassion to be grounded in critical engagement with the ways in which larger sociocultural systems perpetuate privilege and oppression. In other words, I did not want students' take-away to be merely "feeling badly" about their own social locations, as if issues related to (in)equality are solely within individual control. I speculated that if students were introduced to issues of privilege early in their college careers, they might be open to further engagement as they interact with others and make decisions about future coursework, campus activities, and their future careers. I expected these conversations to be difficult, and I sought to mitigate student resistance by openly acknowledging my own identity markers and privilege and sharing in the vulnerability required by the final essay

assignment by composing an essay of my own. Both of these strategies proved effective (as I will demonstrate in the next few paragraphs), although they were not enough to overcome all resistance (as shown in the latter portion of my reflection).

Sharing my identity markers (white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class, Christian) was beneficial precisely because many of them overlapped greatly with many of the students who attend college in a conservative Midwestern state. Because I made my identity markers visible to them, students realized they could identify with me in many ways, and bringing the topic of privilege to bear on my own life shows students that I am willing to practice what I preach. Furthermore, some combinations of my identity markers can challenge assumptions and binary thinking students might have. For example, I revealed myself to be a practicing Catholic in the same conversation in which I identified as an LGBTQ ally. I shared my religious affiliation with students deliberately, as much of the resistance I experienced when leading this unit at UNL was connected to the strong value many students placed on their Catholic identities. I wanted to show that beliefs and identities at times conflict with one other and that identity is not stable so much as fluid and dynamic. Since the goal of this unit was to encourage students to reflect on key aspects of their identities—and religion deeply influences worldview—I wanted it to be part of the conversation. My religious transparency invited, but did not require, equal transparency from my students, and many students did reflect on the role their religious beliefs played in their lives in discussion and writing activities.⁶

Being open with students about my social location was one way in which I attempted to share vulnerability with students: the other was sharing examples of how I engage with privilege in my own life. I included as a unit text a self-authored creative nonfiction essay centered on my experience of being robbed while serving as a volunteer teacher in Honduras and reflected on the role my privilege played in that event. Sharing this essay helped equalize vulnerability in keeping with bell hooks' warning in *Teaching to Transgress* that “Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive” (21). Before reading my essay, we discussed how their unit papers required engagement with uncomfortable subjects and how I felt it was only fair for me to reciprocate. The class period after reading my essay became an “Ask the Author” session, where we discussed the essay's content and my authorial choices. During this class, students asked a variety of questions regarding the form, content, and research process of my essay, such as “Was this a hard paper for you to write since it was so personal to you? How did you overcome your emotions while writing this essay?” and “While doing research for your paper, did you find a lot of information that you thought would work well in your

essay? If so, how did you decide what to include and what to omit?” They also provided thoughtful feedback, including critique.

As I mentioned earlier, however, not every student was willing to engage with the topic of social privilege. Some students openly rejected the idea of privilege in both class discussion and in their low-stakes online writing assignments. For example, I experienced recurring overt resistance from a white male student (referred to here as “David”) when I taught this unit in spring 2016. From the start, David was unwilling to acknowledge the existence of privilege and frequently wrote in his discussion board posts that privilege and discrimination did not exist in “the 21st century.” In one class, I asked students to describe something they found interesting about an assigned text during a reading quiz. David wrote, “I truthfully learned that people will blame all their own challenges and problems that they made on other things.” I later met with David to discuss his resistance to critically engaging with the topic. He was polite and friendly during the meeting as he dismissed his resistance as a simple desire to play “Devil’s Advocate.” David did not alter his engagement with the topic for the rest of the unit, and his final paper was an examination of his lack of privilege in having divorced parents and his privilege of having a military father (neither of which were aspects of identity that we had been discussing). In retrospect, David’s resistance illustrates a significant trade-off for introducing difficult topics such as privilege in the early years of college: students might not yet be emotionally or intellectually mature enough to challenge their pre-existing worldview in any meaningful way. This trade-off does not mean such content should not be taught—just that instructors should acknowledge that they might be unable to work through all resistance. There was one glimmer of success with David, however, as exhibited in his end-of-semester reflection:

When we started the section that talked about privileges I was totally against it. I felt that it is an old topic that should not be brought up in a class. [...] I mean like I didn’t think it existed. I was always brought up that if you wanted to make yourself better in society then you could do so. I have learned in this class that sometimes people have reasons for wanting to study certain areas. I figured out later in the class why you wanted to study privileges. [...] Reading that story [Brita’s essay] helped me build great respect for you as a person, and helped me understand exactly what you wanted us to take out of the section. You were not just trying to push the idea of privileges on us (that’s what I thought at first) but you were trying to help us understand that it is a real life problem.

David's reaction to my essay seems to support Julie Lindquist's claim that students can benefit from teachers sharing the "affective experience[s] that have produced the teachers' own belief" (191). While shared vulnerability and self-disclosure made David more amenable to the topic of privilege, there are (or should be) limits. Teachers ought to have boundaries with their students, and it is possible for a teacher to cross a line between what is appropriate and inappropriate to share. Student resistance, especially from privileged students, is not something that will disappear. In future classes, it would be important to cultivate methods of engaging resistant students that go beyond instructor self-disclosure.

Collective Takeaways: A Dialogue

The students in our classes approached their final papers in multiple ways. Topics ranged from being a woman in the Lutheran church (religious and gender privileges), to being a bicultural student applying for college scholarships (racial and educational privileges), to experiencing gender discrimination while playing expensive club sports (gender and class privileges), to the benefits of performing traditional and heteronormative masculinity as a male (gender and sexuality privileges), to being a Korean American citizen but not speaking Korean (nationality and linguistic privilege), and to the ability to pursue a college education in another country or state (education and class privileges), among others. The variety of student approaches to the writing project shows the richness the topic of privilege holds for writing that incorporates personal experience, outside research, and cultural and self-analysis. To build on the successful aspects of this unit, we recommend that future iterations take greater advantage of multiple modes of content and delivery, such as incorporating TEDTalks, podcasts, and documentaries.

Students also benefit from reading their peers' papers during peer workshops, both in developing their papers as pieces of writing and gaining further insight into the topic of privilege based on each other's personal experiences. Students frequently commented on these benefits from peer workshops in their end-of-unit reflections. Peer workshops are a crucial aspect of this unit's success because it allows students to learn from their peers and realize that many of the issues we touched on in unit readings apply to the lived experiences of people they know.

As we described in our individual sections, one of the biggest hurdles we both experienced when teaching this unit came from student resistance that typically resulted from an inability or unwillingness to move past myths such as meritocracy and a post-racial society that American students have been inculcated with by mainstream American culture for the past several decades. Additionally, the students in our classes (as well as the authors of this article)

grew up in so-called colorblind America and were teenagers and young adults during the Obama administration, where discussions of race in white spaces was often either shushed or celebrated as watered-down moments of “multiculturalism” (Armstrong and Wildman 68). This culture, which pervaded our predominantly white classrooms at UNL, made students very uncomfortable thinking about or discussing racism as a continuing problem, as well as resistant to the idea that their whiteness leads to privilege (Armstrong and Wildman 64). Additionally, while they might identify acts of racism on the individual level (Tucker), they are unlikely to see it as a systemic problem. These kinds of reactions were in keeping with “White Fragility,” a term coined by Robin DiAngelo that explains the common inability of white people to tolerate any degree of race-based discomfort (DiAngelo 54).

Resistance to discussions of racial privilege was not the only hurdle; we also found that students viewed issues pertaining to class, gender, and to some degree, sexuality in similar ways.⁷ For example, gender privilege was a topic that students frequently examined in their writing, with several students expressing views that sexism was no longer a pervasive issue and certainly not a problem in the US compared to other countries. We believe our location in Lincoln, NE and the fact that most of our students were white Midwesterners contributed to these views, particularly in regard to race, as several students in our classes expressed that the UNL campus was the most diverse place they had ever lived.⁸ Navigating moments of student resistance worked best in one-on-one conference settings. Student resistance, while an expected challenge of teaching a unit such as this one, presents opportunities for learning for both students and teachers. Incorporating moments for reflection after discussions and in one-on-one settings, such as conferences, offers a space to unpack some of the resistance.

We each handled this resistance differently in our classrooms; however, we argue that feelings of guilt are a major cause of resistance to this topic, as well as one of the most common emotions students expressed during this unit when they owned their privileges. Students, especially those who are already predisposed to feel compassion or empathy for others, dislike the idea that their privilege might come at the expense of another person or group (Platt 215). As a result, students might wish to avoid discussions of these topics in order to protect their emotional states. Patience with students is key to incorporating a unit or topics surrounding privilege, as students are often thinking critically about these concepts for the first time in our courses. We must underscore the importance of anti-racist work as an ongoing practice that requires regular reflection and assessment.

The current state of the nation demonstrates the urgent need for critical conversations that engage identities, cultivate compassion, and model vulner-

ability in our classrooms. A unit on identity and social privilege such as we designed creates space for students to reflect on and analyze their personal experiences in a way that contextualizes them within a larger sociocultural climate. Asking students to analyze their individual experiences and social positioning moves beyond mere “confessional” writing, teaching them critical thinking and rhetorical skills that are valued in academia and in the world. As composition teachers, we are in a unique position to help students engage with these issues because we deal in representations and constructions of the self and others through writing and language. Our typically small class sizes, as well as the fact that introductory composition courses are often general education requirements, allows us to form personal connections with an array of students across disciplines. Our classrooms cultivate opportunities for students to engage often difficult discussions grounded in shared vulnerability and constructive dialogue. A unit on privilege and identity is one way that we as composition teachers can actively respond to today’s cultural climate in a manner that moves beyond celebrations of diversity, instead asking students to examine what diversity really looks like in and through individuals’ lived experiences. Students can use personal experience, rhetorical skills, and research to interrogate and combat stereotypes. In other words, we can work with students toward resisting single stories—whether about ourselves or people quite different from them.

Notes

1. This unit was designed and taught while Kumari and Thielen were both at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln in 2015–2016. Kumari is now an Assistant Professor at Texas A&M University–Commerce; Thielen is a PhD candidate at Case Western Reserve University.

2. Peggy McIntosh describes privilege as “a corollary of discrimination” or “the ‘upside’ of oppression; it is unearned advantage that corresponds to unearned disadvantage in society” (2013, xi).

3. See Case, *Deconstructing Privilege*, for a collection of pedagogical articles on privilege.

4. Additionally, these discussions of representation sought to help students avoid or complicate problematic overidentification with people whose experiences were drastically different from their own. Kathryn Johnson Gindlesparger calls attention to this problem in her examination of student study abroad writing. While we of course were not familiar with Gindlesparger’s work at the time of our teaching, we share her concerns.

5. See “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” (2012).

6. Heather Thomson-Bunn argues that fear of being stereotyped or eliciting instructor disapproval often results in students avoiding religion or religious discourse in their writing (380–381).

7. Because our students were in high school during the heat of the gay marriage debate, we found they are more likely to see discrimination and oppression of the LGBTQ community as an ongoing problem. Resistance to discussing sexuality was frequently tied to students' religious backgrounds.

8. Although many of our students were from Omaha, NE (and Omaha as a city is more diverse than Lincoln), most of the students we taught in these courses were from suburban areas of Omaha, which are predominantly white. These students acknowledged that they had little contact with people of other races in their everyday life.

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