

Profile 2

Centering Students in the First-Year Composition Classroom: Engagement, Improvement, and Pedagogical Practices

A Teaching and Learning Institute Hosted by Huston-Tillotson University, funded by UNCF/Mellon Programs
Shawanda Stewart and Brian Stone

Huston-Tillotson University (HT), located in Austin, Texas, is a private liberal arts university with a student population of about one thousand. Though the university is oftentimes mistakenly identified as having been founded in response to freed slaves being denied admission to other universities in Austin, the truth is that Huston-Tillotson, chartered in 1875 as Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute (“2013–2014 Factbook”), is the oldest institution of higher education in Austin. In spring 2015, we received a grant from UNCF/Mellon Programs to host a teaching and learning institute for English faculty from other historically black colleges and universities across the nation. Our institute, entitled “Centering Students in the First-Year Composition Classroom: Engagement, Improvement, and Pedagogical Practices,” sought to provide a forum for advanced instruction in pedagogy, research, and assessment for first-year composition faculty at other UNCF/Mellon member schools.

From our personal teaching experiences, we recognized the divergent beliefs among students, faculty, and administrators at our own HBCU regarding the role of standard edited American written English (SEAWE) in composition classrooms. Due to the perceived importance of such traditional grammatical instruction at our own institution, especially among faculty outside of English, we wanted to further explore the ways writing pedagogies at other private HBCUs were similar to or different from our own and to better understand the extent to which current research in students’ rights to their own language and antiracist writing assessment inform the practices of writing instructors at HBCUs. Heeding David F. Green Jr.’s call for “compositionists at HBCUs [to] lead conversations about linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism within the field of composition” (162), we acknowledge that it is difficult to turn a blind eye to the social and political implications of composition pedagogy that privileges SEAWE and penalizes students for expressing themselves in their home languages. This privileging of pedagogies and assessments designed according to the social and cultural realities of a largely middle-class, white student

body has hindered the academic success of African American students for decades (Rickford 1999; Alim 2007) and has not only misrepresented the truth about African American students' academic capacities but has remained a major factor in African American students' academic (un)interest and (un)success.

Accordingly, it is not uncommon to read disparaging statistics about African American student literacy underachievement on national assessments. For instance, the National Center for Education Statistics of the US Department of Education reports that only 16 percent (the lowest rate of all racial/ethnic groups listed) of African American twelfth graders scored at or above proficient on the reading portion of the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress. They also report that the critical reading and writing SAT scores of African American students ranked lowest by racial/ethnic group and below the national average. This account of African American underachievement (and the countless tales of others like it) paints a picture of inability—a “reality” that simply is not true—and these false assumptions risk affecting instructors' attitudes, teaching practices, and philosophies in composition classrooms. In *Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and Ideology*, Margaret Zamudio and her coauthors identify such narratives as the myth of meritocracy. They explain that this myth assumes a level playing field for all students; however, this simply is not the case. Consequently, rather than scrutinize the decisions and structures of educational systems when white students continually *appear* to outperform students of color, the myth of meritocracy assumes that this academic disparity is based on “an individual's efforts and talents” (12) rather than on systemic practices. Zamudio et al. further explain that “the notion of meritocracy is a master narrative that guides our understanding about society in general” (12). As a result, we believe that the work of first-year writing instructors at HBCUs, our students' successes, and the increased publication of both can play a palpable role in dismantling this master narrative.

In this light, we wanted to provide a space where writing faculty could share our teaching experiences, pedagogy, and writing assessments while also engaging in dialogue with institute presenters. Drawing from the fields of sociolinguistics, rhetoric, and composition, we offered a four-day, hands-on, interdisciplinary institute where faculty learned, shared, and created composition pedagogy and assessments designed to improve African American student success in first-year composition. We had four presenters—Staci Perryman-Clark, Asao B. Inoue, Brian Stone, and Shawanda Stewart—who each focused on a different component of student engagement, improvement, and pedagogical practices in first-year composition.

On the first day of the institute, Staci Perryman-Clark from Western Michigan University presented “Aligning Students Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) with Your Writing Program.” During her presentation, Perryman-Clark defined and discussed the sometimes controversial SRTOL, a presentation that initiated meaningful and thoughtful discussion that continued for the remainder of the institute. On Day 2, Huston-Tillotson professors Brian Stone (who now teaches at California State Polytechnic University) and Shawanda Stewart presented “Critical

Hip-Hop Rhetoric Pedagogy,” a pilot empirical study to investigate students’ engagement in a first-year writing curriculum design, inspired by the research of H. Samy Alim. On the third day, Asao B. Inoue, director of University Writing and the Writing Center at the University of Washington Tacoma, defined racist writing assessment and suggested ideas for enacting antiracist writing assessment ecologies in our composition courses. On the final day of the institute, each participant presented for fifteen minutes. Some presented changes they were going to make to already created assignments while others created completely new assignments in response to what we had discussed during the institute.

Discussion and assignment-sharing among institute participants confirmed our attention to Afrocentric education at our HBCUs in part as a result of instructors’ purposeful intention to practice pedagogy “grounded in worldviews employing educational practices that are culturally situated within the interests of the people of the African Diaspora” (Perryman-Clark 9), but also because doing so is in large part a unique characteristic shared among our colleges and universities. In arguing for the contemporary necessity of HBCUs, former North Carolina Central University Chancellor Charlie Nelms says: “HBCUs provide a culturally affirming, psychologically supportive environment. Students don’t have to prove they belong here” (qtd. in Goode par. 2). At the institute, it became apparent that providing culturally relevant writing instruction is woven throughout our pedagogy because it is not only what we do, but it is also who we are. Despite consensus for the need for and benefits of culturally affirming pedagogy in first-year writing, however, there was a general resistance to a movement away from the need for standard written English as a first-year writing outcome, primarily out of concern over existing social prejudices and campus administrative constraints. Even though institute participants are proponents of pedagogies that resist institutionalized racism and white supremacy and are aware of research that speaks to the benefits of students’ rights to their own language, the question remained whether an expectation that students demonstrate a strong command of standard written English in first-year composition is actually a tool to resist institutional racism or one that complies with it.

Below is a sample syllabus, one major assignment with rubric, and a student sample from our Critical Hip-Hop Rhetoric Pedagogy pilot course, followed by the institute takeaway and sample assignment from institute participant James Eubanks of Stillman College.

CRITICAL HIP-HOP RHETORIC PEDAGOGY (CHHRP)

Syllabus (abbreviated version)

Like some other writing faculty at the institute who expressed a concern about not having complete autonomy in what they teach because of administratively established course goals, we too had some limitations in this regard. As you see below, the course (and sample assignment) emphasizes language variety, but in our course goals (shared across first-year writing courses), our writing program still assesses for standard written English.

<i>Huston-Tillotson University</i> English 1301 Introduction to College Composition	
Instructor	Name: Office: Phone: E-mail: Conference Hours:
Class Meeting	
Required Readings	Axelrod & Cooper's <i>Concise Guide to Writing</i>, 6th ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013. Additional readings will be online, distributed in class, or available in local libraries or other resource centers.
Technical Requirements	Regular access to a working computer with Internet connection; Microsoft Word and PowerPoint software; an Internet browser (Explorer, Safari, Chrome, Firefox, etc.); portable media storage (CD, flash drive); working my.htu.edu account; working and accessible HT email account.
Course Content	English 1301, the first course in the college composition sequence, helps students develop critical reading skills and a clear and effective writing style appropriate for academic contexts. The course familiarizes students with academic audiences, situations, purposes, genres, and the primary conventions of those genres, and introduces students to incorporating sources into their writing. Students develop planning, organizing, and revising skills. This course reviews standard American grammar and usage in the context of student writing and fosters vocabulary acquisition. Students must earn at least a C to progress to ENG 1302.
Course Goals	This course is designed to help you develop your writing, reading, and critical thinking skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ engaging in writing as a recursive process ▪ reading for understanding, as a respondent to another writer, and to stimulate ideas ▪ incorporating others' ideas and words into your writing appropriately ▪ shaping your writing for personal, public, and academic contexts ▪ understanding the various forms of English used in different cultures and contexts ▪ understanding hip-hop as a means of verbal, visual, and sonorous cultural expression ▪ controlling standard written English conventions ▪ working effectively as a member of a team in collaborative learning activities ▪ integrating visual, oral, and technological media with written messages
Essays	<i>Digital Literacy Narrative</i> (final draft of at least 4 pages of text, formatted in MLA style, plus Works Cited) will be a narrative describing your experience gaining literacy in your home language or in standard English. <i>Profile Essay–Community Interview</i> (final draft of at least 4 pages of text, formatted in MLA style, plus Works Cited) will be a profile, describing language and its relation to place in your community. <i>Social Media Essay</i> (final draft of at least 4 pages of text, formatted in MLA style, plus Works Cited) will explain and define a discourse community. <i>Summary and Rhetorical Analysis–Synthesis of Styles</i> (final draft of at least 4 pages of text, formatted in MLA style, plus Works Cited)

Policy on Academic Dishonesty	Academic dishonesty includes any form of cheating, plagiarism, falsification of records, collusion, or giving false information to any University official. See the University Bulletin for definition of terms, penalties, and procedures for appealing dishonesty. Instructors have the option to recommend a grade of F for the course if dishonesty is proven.
--------------------------------------	--

Students requiring special accommodations to ensure success in this class should schedule a consultation with the instructor.

Sample Assignment

Profile Essay – Community Interview

What:

In a profile essay, a writer might explore the ins and outs of a specific place or type of place, a person, or an activity, job, or responsibility that people have seldom heard of. **For this essay, you will *profile* language and its relation to place in a community familiar to you.**

To write your essay, you must conduct an interview with someone who is a part of this chosen community and whose language is representative of this place. Please be sure to observe your subject (place and language) closely, and then present what you have learned in a way that both informs and engages readers. You will be a guide for your readers, providing them with valuable details and persuading them of the relevance of language in relation to this place.

Why:

A profile essay draws upon several writing skills. It encourages the use of rich and varied detail in order to engage your readers. It also draws upon skills such as observation and interviewing. Finally, this type of essay encourages a great amount of research into the subject at hand in order to adequately depict it.

How:

The essay, when completed, will be at least 4 pages of text. Leading up to your final draft you will submit (1) a topic proposal with a working thesis, (2) a partial draft for peer review, and (3) a typed draft of your interview.

For assistance with organizing and writing this essay, see chapter 3 in *The Concise Guide to Writing*. Lastly, you should use the correct page layout and appropriate MLA documentation.

	Did It	Almost Did It	Didn't Do It
Demonstrated awareness of purpose and audience.			
Provided detailed information about the subject profiled by interweaving description, anecdotes, and quotations.			
Made obvious his/her role as the writer and his/her perspective on the subject.			
Had a clear and logical plan (organization).			
Exhibited an understanding of various forms of language used in different contexts.			

Excerpt from Student Essay

Urban Hipster Community

We sub-consciously live in an era where the urban hipster community is impactful on the youth and social media. From fashion to the way we talk and carry ourselves a lot of us are urban hipsters and don't even know it. An urban hipster would be an individual who is different from societies norms and taking on an alternative lifestyle. I can be things like how some people are huge on organic foods and products or could enjoy going to the thrift store but still fashionable. A person from this sub-culture may also be into nostalgic games like Nintendo 64 but not an nerd. An urban hipster most of the time is not a product of their environment they express themselves by the way they live and things they do. The urban hipster community became prominent in 2010 according to Wikipedia. I wanted to profile this community because from what I observe as being a product of social media and an avid trend watcher I see how language in the urban hipster community impact the youth in so many ways that we are un-aware of. Words like Wavy, Lit, Live, and Piped up are words that are used frequently on social network sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr.

“Lit” means its good vibes or its fun people of the urban hipster community would use it a lot if they are trying to describe a song, party, or really anything that makes you excited and express good vibes. A design on a couch could be considered “Lit” if you like the design and it caused a state of euphoria. The word “Wavy” is also used a lot on social media and in conversations in the urban hipster community. Matter of fact on Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr a person may post a picture and use a wave emoji to represent the actual word “Wavy”.

Emoji's are symbols used in text and social media to represent a phrase or word and most importantly emotion. Emoji's are vital in the hipster world because urban hipsters will use emoji's but in a way that is different from how most people may use them. It may be trendy or it may be how they may want to express themselves but why do it like that? I ask myself this question often when I'm on twitter and Instagram. I also see a lot of short trendy phrases that appeal to a certain crowd of followers on social media and it has impact on the urban hipster community.

I sat down with [interviewee] a 21 year old photographer who attends UT and she is also a close friend of mine. I feel like she is an ideal example of an urban hipster but when I asked her what she thought the term meant. She replied with “I'm not sure of what that is.” When I interviewed her she was just getting off work but still had all her piercings in. She has ear-piercings but the most interesting thing about her is a neck piercing, as weird people make think it is from the sound of it. It was actually very stylish on her and unique and [interviewee] had a new hair color to match. Before I interviewed her she had like a lime green color on the top part of her short hair, now her hair is blonde very similar to mine. When I explained to her what the urban hipster community was and me pointing out certain things I seem in her that is a part of the sub-culture, she agreed that she is a urban hipster. I began to ask her general questions that I had like, what are your views on language in social media? She gave me an answer saying “I feel like there is nothing wrong with slang words and emoji's on social media but sometimes seeing the same constant people say or do the same things over and over again can be annoying” She also went on to saying that she really don't be on social media like that.

...

Language is vital in everyday life and is the main thing we use to express ourselves we even sometimes wear words on our clothes. You may go to the mall and see girls with a shirt that says “Pink” on it and I have several conversations with people on how they dress how they feel. The urban hipster community of today is real big on expressing how they feel whether its though fashion, music, or language. I feel maybe that’s why I can honestly say I’m proud to be a part of the sub-culture that push for change and something different whether it’s saying the word “live” to describe the aura of an event or wearing ripped up jeans to express my diversity and being free to do what I want to do. Language gives individuals power and freedom of expression and I support anything along those lines. One day when I get older I can look back and see how far language in a sub-culture came because I feel like eventually certain slang words will get used more and become a part of the dictionary and the urban hipster community will be responsible for the advancement of language throughout the English language. Profiling today’s sub-culture made me realize how innovative we are as people all together. We should embrace our language and not take anything we have today for granted.

INSTITUTE PARTICIPANT’S REFLECTION AND SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

James Eubanks, Stillman College

Institute Takeaway

One of the key ideals that I took away from the UNCF/Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute was the need to innovate even in the face of institutional issues. Because of the system in place that governs issues like the number and types of essays that can be assigned at my institution (Stillman College), sweeping pedagogical changes are difficult to implement, especially as I would desire for some of those changes to be rooted in a discussion about students’ right to their own language, when much of our instructional aim is to maneuver students toward more standardized communication. So I focused my course adjustments on one unit: argumentation. It is a stated aim in our department to develop more incisively critical thinkers, and learning how to construct and deconstruct argumentation is a crucial part of that development.

Sample Assignment

Unit Objectives

The students are expected to learn the following:

- plan an effective argumentative essay
- recognize how to use logical, emotional, and character support (i.e., *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*)
- recognize segments of argumentation
- construct an appropriate and effective thesis statement
- develop introductory and subsequent paragraphs that support the thesis
- reflect on the unit’s writing mode, argumentation

- analyze argumentation essays via the reading material assigned for the unit
- exhibit capability to use and navigate course software
- examine and apply the appropriate grammatical structures and punctuation via activities from *Patterns for College Writing*

The objectives are departmentally set, and thus cannot be changed, but they are not constrictive in regard to what I wish to accomplish within the unit.

Assignments

Each unit has two major assignments for assessment, an essay and a reflective paragraph, in which students reflect on what they learned or found difficult to master about the unit's specific mode of writing. In previous semesters, the prompts for the assignments were:

- **Argumentative Essay:** Compose an organized essay in 500–750 words (2–3 pages) that discusses a controversial issue of today that affects your personal life. You must type your essay in a word processor, save the essay to your personal files, and upload the essay into this assignment. This particular essay is also a personal essay, but you are not allowed to choose a different topic.
- **Argumentative Reflective Paragraph:** Do you consider yourself a persuasive person? Why or why not? What methods of argumentation that we've talked about in class do you think you'll be able to use to be convincing outside of class?

The discussions I had at the Teaching and Learning Institute led me to enact the following changes to the prompts:

- **Argumentative Essay:** Compose an organized essay in 500–750 words (2–3 pages) that discusses whether or not students have a right to speak or write however they choose to in the classroom. Or you may discuss a controversial issue that affects you. You must . . .
- **Argumentative Reflective Paragraph:** Suppose you are writing to your best friend. Write to them using the language you normally would, explaining to them some ways to construct a successful argument.

I gave students a choice for the main essay, but did not for the reflection. My thinking behind this change was that in the reflection students would have a low-stakes chance to consider the topic that they could expand on in their essays, if they chose. It is a very nuanced topic and one many students had not considered before, so I did not wish to stake their success solely on their ability to argue well for one side of the issue within the context of written discourse. In classroom discussion, I felt the discussion of students' rights to their own language was a good jumping-off point to begin our discussions of the workings of argumentation and felt that, on aggregate, the students were engaged and willing to debate one another, as their

viewpoints were far more varied than is typically the case if the topic is something they find to be more orthodox, which was something that I found to be true of the discussion we had on the topic at the institute.

All in all, I have been encouraged by my early implementation of strategies that I developed at the institute and will be actively looking for more places in my curriculum where I can implement additional pedagogical strategies based on what I learned.

WORKS CITED

- Alim, H. Samy. "Critical Hip-Hop Language Pedagogies: Combat, Consciousness, and the Cultural Politics of Communication." *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2007, pp. 161–76.
- Goode, Robin White. "The HBCU Debate: Are Black Colleges and Universities Still Needed?" *Black Enterprise*, 15 Feb. 2011, www.blackenterprise.com/lifestyle/are-hbcus-still-relevant/.
- Green, David F., Jr. "Raising Game." *Composition Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, Fall 2016, pp. 162–66.
- Huston-Tillotson University, Office of Institutional Advancement. *Huston-Tillotson University Fact Book 2013–2014*. htu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Fact_Book_2013-20142.pdf.
- Perryman-Clark, Staci M. *Afrocentric Teacher-Research: Rethinking Appropriateness and Inclusion*. Peter Lang, 2013.
- Rickford, John R. "Language Diversity and Academic Achievement in the Education of African American Students—An Overview of the Issues." *Making the Connection: Language and Academic Achievement among African American Students*, edited by Carolyn Temple Adger, Donna Christian, and Orlando L. Taylor, Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems, 1999, pp. 1–30.
- Tinto, Vincent. "Through the Eyes of Students." *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, vol. 19, no. 3, Nov. 2017, pp. 254–69.
- United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. "Are the Nation's Twelfth-Graders Making Progress in Mathematics and Reading?" *The Nation's Report Card*, www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_g12_2013/#/.
- Zamudio, Margaret M., Caskey Russell, Francisco A. Rios, and Jacqueline L. Bridgeman. *Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and Ideology*. Routledge, 2011.