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“Don’t Speechify: Do Something”: A Case Study on the Power of Counter Narrative

Darolyn “Lyn” Jones, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Truth: The official narrative of the United States is one of freedom, but in a 1776 democracy, our freedom narrative was written for white males. It was not meant to be democracy for the rest of us. “Racism is entrenched in the structure of everything. If and when black lives finally matter,” activist and scholar Angela Davis proclaims, “then all lives will matter, but until that happens, black equality, freedom, and voices are not recognized.”¹²⁴ In DiAngelo’s now well-known book, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, reminds us that “The United States was founded on the principle that all people are created equal. Yet the nation began with the attempted genocide of Indigenous people and the theft of their land. American wealth was built on the labor of kidnapped and enslaved Africans and their descendants. Women were denied the right to vote until 1920, and black women were denied access to that right until 1964.”¹²⁵

Angela Davis, truth teller, presented a challenge when I heard her speak to faculty and students at a higher education institution: “Don’t speechify.” Don’t just say something, DO something. Be an activist. If you work in academia, then use your power of writing to be a scholar activist and engage students in the action.¹²⁶ I interpreted this call from Davis to mean that we in academia should design curriculum and deliver content that allows students to study and take action, change their own thinking

¹²⁴ Angela Davis, “Institutional Racism in the Penal & Criminal Justice System,” Key Note Speech, Diversity Symposium at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, September 22, 2017.

¹²⁵ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, (Boston: BeaconPress, 2018), xiii.

¹²⁶ Davis, Key Note.

and ideally enact change with the citizens in the very cities and communities where their campus resides and with the future citizens they will impact in the future.

I am a lifelong activist who grew up poor, living in several different households. I am a white female and first generation college graduate. My early career included teaching English in high-poverty rural, public school districts while also volunteering as a public school teacher union organizer and a state Holocaust educator. I was always committed to teaching a social justice curriculum in my state's conservative, Midwestern communities.

I left the classroom to pursue a doctoral degree, taking a part-time position at the Indiana Writer's Center as its Education Outreach Director. For the last ten years, I have been simultaneously working with the Center as well as teaching as a contract faculty member for a Midwestern, midsized public university. At the Center, I assist and teach with our Public Memoir project, which helps marginalized populations in the city write and present their stories to the community at large. We publish those stories with our independent press and often also perform these stories as fused theater and dance events. We invite the public to come, hear, and learn more about the lived human experience of their marginalized neighbors.

The Indiana Writers Center hires university education and creative writing student interns in the summers to assist us with the youth Public Memoir project, where the Center serves 200-250 high poverty, underserved students ages 6-16, partnering with the city's various community centers and existing summer youth programs. The students we serve with this project are all African American or bi-racial; the majority of our university student interns are Caucasian and from middle or high-income communities. At the university, I work as a community engagement scholar partnering creative writing and writing program students with community partners to either write community stories or engage in research that impacts positive change for the community partner. What I am presenting is a case study that intersects the two populations I teach and serve.

This is a case study of an educational program delivered by the Indiana Writers Center, a literary non-profit organization. The case study is two-fold. It presents questions and data that include both the students ages 6-16 that we at the Center serve in our Public Memoir Program *and* the university student interns who assist with the delivery of the curricular content of the counter narrative we engage students to write. The research questions that guided this case study are as follows: How can the design and delivery of a counter narrative curriculum disrupt the master narrative? And, how does the production of counter narratives disrupt the master narrative?

To clarify, how does the design and delivery of a counter narrative disrupt the master narrative that students ages 6-16 learn in their prior traditional educational experience? And how does what the students ages 6-16 write disrupt what the university students have learned in their own traditional educational experience? How does the writing produced by the students ages 6-16 and the reflective writing produced by university student interns disrupt the master narrative?

Yin, a leader in the field of case study, defines case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.” Yin clarifies that “case study relies on multiple sources of evidence with data.”¹²⁷ Thomas concurs, noting that case study is a unique type of inquiry because we are charged with “understanding how and why something might have happened or why it might be the case.” And Thomas adds that while researchers use different methods and sources of data to investigate, a case study at its core is “looking at relationships and processes.”¹²⁸

This is a case study where, like Thomas, I too am interested in the “thing it itself, as a whole.” Both case study experts, Yin and Thomas, agree that as case study researchers we must examine our

¹²⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case study research: Design and Methods*, 5th ed., (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2014), 16-17.

¹²⁸ Gary Thomas, *How to do your case study*. 2nd ed., (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2016), 4, 11.

subjects from a variety of perspectives. According to Thomas, key features of case study is having an intimate connection with the “thing” or the subject being studied and because of that intimacy, the researcher wants to study the case.¹²⁹ I have access and know the urban youth we serve through the Center, and I know and have access to my university student interns as I actively recruit from the university where I teach.

Christine Stanley explains the difference between master versus counter narratives: “A master narrative is a script that specifies and controls how some social processes are carried out.”

Perspectives that run opposite or counter to the presumed order and control are counter narratives. These narratives, which do not agree with and are critical of the master narrative, often arise out of individual or group experiences that do not fit the master narratives. Counter narratives act to deconstruct the master narratives, and they offer alternatives to the dominant discourse in educational research. They provide, for example, multiple and conflicting models of understanding social and cultural identities. They also challenge the dominant White and often predominantly male culture that is held to be normative and author.

Stanley makes it perfectly clear that master narrative is not a single perspective, and that counter narratives “arise out of individual or group experiences that do not fit the master narratives.” Counter narratives act “to deconstruct the master narratives and they offer alternatives to the dominant discourse...”¹³⁰

ACCESS TO COUNTER NARRATIVES IN PREK-HIGHER EDUCATION

Think about the spaces and places where books live. Bookstores (which are dwindling and becoming larger and less independent), libraries (whose funding is being slashed all over the country), department stores (who stock only what sells and what sells is what is popular or “classic”), and classrooms (where the choices are contingent on the curriculum and the stories the individual teacher

¹²⁹ Gary Thomas. 2016, *How to do your case study*, 3.

¹³⁰ Christine Stanley, “When Counter Narratives Meet Master Narratives in the Journal Editorial Review Process.” *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 1 (2007): 14, doi: 10.3102/0013189X06298008.

knows and since 80% of teachers are white and from middle class backgrounds, these stories may not be inclusive.^{131&132}

Diversity in the texts we teach students in school or academia is critical in constructing culture and community identity. We grow up, are conditioned by, and are ultimately wired and re-wired by the texts we read, hear, and retell. The gatekeeping of diverse text happens at home, in educational institutions, in communities, from publishers who often prevent counter narratives from being consumed, read, learned, and therefore, valued.¹³³

An example of this gross disparity can be seen with children's and young adult literature, which represent the highest producing genre in the publishing market. A 2014 study and statistic offered by the leading research agency for children's literature, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin, notes that of the 3,200 children's books published in 2013, only 93 were about Black people despite the fact that Black population in this country is 14.1%. The most recent study just released for 2019 shows those numbers increasing, but unfortunately, not enough. Of the 4,034 of the total children's books published in 2019, 219 were by Black authors and 472 were about Black characters, still representing only 17% of the total children's book market. And given the pressure placed on publishers to diversify, that 2019 stat only increased by .5% from 2018.¹³⁴

In "The Apartheid of Children's Literature," young adult writer and journalist, Christopher Myers discussed the 2014 above study, admonishing publishers, illustrating to *New York Times* readers that while "the mission statements of major publishers are littered with intentions, with their commitments to diversity, to imagination, to multiculturalism, while the editors of these companies bemoan the statistics, 'the fact remains that the "numbers and truths are stark reassurances.'" The children's and young adult literature franchise, Myers points out, is growing and becoming more and

¹³¹ Darolyn Jones, "New Publication Highlights the Need for Diverse Books." *Reading Today* 32, no.4, (December 9, 2014): 24.

¹³² National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), "Fast Facts: Teacher Trends," 2016, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=28>

¹³³ Darolyn Jones, "New Publication Highlights the Need for Diverse Books," 34.

¹³⁴ CCBCBlogC, "The Numbers are In: 2019 CCBC Diversity Statistics," <http://ccblogc.blogspot.com/2020/06/the-numbers-are-in-2019-ccbc-diversity.html>

more popular, yet ‘young people of color are harder to find.’¹³⁵ Institutional racism remains an issue in this country and no doubt in the current publishing climate as well.

As a classroom teacher committed to social justice, I was aware of the misrepresentations in the history books, the lack of representation in the literature anthologies, and the curriculum and standardized tests which perpetuated stereotypes and were riddled with bias. I volunteered at the state level to create the first set of state standards to combat those misrepresentations and to audit state tests for bias. Unfortunately, there weren’t enough of us to challenge, and we were constantly battling politicians and the State Department of Education’s current agenda.

While I was seeking my doctorate, I worked as a PreK-12 consultant conducting curriculum audits of classroom curriculum. Having the opportunity to see curriculum being taught in schools all over the state illustrated clearly to me that teachers still held the most power in determining what curriculum and how that curriculum was taught. Counter narrative was minimally or rarely included. What few opportunities were included for counter narratives or non-Eurocentric histories were typically condensed or taught out of context.

When I joined the ranks of higher education, I was hopeful that academia would include more educators like me who were also committed to teaching counternarrative. I haven’t discovered that to be true. Similarly to PreK-12, I did find a camp of social activists in higher education committed to teaching the counter narrative. Overall, the academy still mostly teaches our students using stories and strategies from textbooks and classic literature that are dominated by a white patriarchy. The majority of our university professors? White males. The primary generators of academic publications? White males. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), in 2017, 41% of the

¹³⁵ Christopher Myers, “The Apartheid of Literature,” *The New York Times: Sunday Review*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/the-apartheid-of-childrens-literature.html>, March 15, 2014.

professors in higher education were white males, 35% female and only 3% represented Black and Hispanic males and females.¹³⁶

It's important to note that 73% of all faculty positions in higher education are held by non-secure faculty working as adjunct, part time, or contract. So, when one examines the data of non-secure faculty, the numbers showcase decreased representation in post-secondary institutions, with 54% of males occupying higher positions of tenure and power while only 27% of women and fewer than 2% Black or Hispanic faculty hold similar positions.¹³⁷ With this low representation of Black and brown voices and an even lower representation of gender and race diversity in positions of power, the academic journals and textbooks written and taught in higher education are also overwhelmingly white and male. Stanley contends that “there is a master narrative operating in academia that often defines and limits what is valued as scholarship and who is entitled to create scholarship.”¹³⁸

Because the gatekeepers within the educational, literary, and academic textbook and journal publishing houses are led primarily by white male editorial teams, they silence counter narratives. National Public Radio (NPR) featured a story on diversity in book publishing. NPR's reporting featured a survey that reported on staff demographics within departments.

In Marketing and Publicity, 77 percent were white. These are people who make decisions on how to position books to the press and to consumers, and if and where to send authors on tour — critical considerations in the successful launching of any publication. For writers of color, the lack of diversity in book publicity departments can feel like a death knell.¹³⁹

And the majority of books, novels, or articles presented to those publishing houses are also written by white males. Vida, a literary arts organization focused on equality, shared 2017 data from *New York*

¹³⁶ National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), “Fast Facts: Race Ethnicity of College Faculty,” <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>, 2017.

¹³⁷ AAUP, *Data Snapshot: Contingent Faculty in US Higher Education*, <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/10112018%20Data%20Snapshot%20Tenure.pdf>, 2018.

¹³⁸ Christine Stanley, “When Counter Narratives Meet Master Narratives” in *The Journal Editorial Review Process* (2007): 15, doi: 10.3102/0013189X06298008.

¹³⁹ Jean Ho, “Diversity in Book Publishing Isn’t Just About Writers- Publishing Matters, Too,” *National Public Radio*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/08/09/483875698/diversity-in-book-publishing-isnt-just-about-writers-marketing-matters-too>. August 9, 2016.

Review of Books where 77% of the books were by male writers and only 23% by female writers.¹⁴⁰ The message? White, patriarchal texts are what are sought after, what are published, what are shelved and too often, what are taught.

Who is the audience for these texts? Who are the majority of students attending the universities? At my university, the audience is overwhelmingly white, middle class and upper middle-class students seeking advance degrees. Racial diversity has made improvements, but the academy still mirrors the national statistics where only 14% of students enrolled in universities are Black. However, the publishers publish for the dominant and master narrative. A deficiency of diversity and counter narrative in publishing leads to no pedagogical change, hence, closing the door to diversifying our instructors at the academy and to our student population.¹⁴¹ DiAngelo summarizes this point: “The identities of those sitting at the tables of power in this country have remained remarkably similar: white, male, middle- and upper-class, able-bodied. The decisions made at those tables affect the lives of those not at the tables.”¹⁴² And whether we are discussing political power or the agendas of educators and publishers, the decisions made about what to write, publish, shelve, and teach have serious consequences.

Finding works or designing counter narrative curriculum that counters the white, patriarchal hegemony require an individual instructor in PreK- Higher Education to:

- 1) Have access to counter narratives
- 2) Have knowledge and experience with teaching counter narratives
- 3) Know how to design and deliver a counter narrative curriculum; and
- 4) Have the intellectual freedom at a university to teach a counter narrative without fear of being muted, reprimanded, or facing job loss.

¹⁴⁰ Vida, “The 2017 Vida Count,” <https://www.vidaweb.org/the-count/the-2017-vida-count/#Summary>, 2017.

¹⁴¹ National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), “Fast Facts: Post-Secondary Enrollment Rates,” <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>, 2016.

¹⁴² Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 2018, xii.

My 30 years of combined experience teaching in secondary and higher education has clearly illustrated to me that too many teachers teach what and how they were taught. Again, as noted previously, since 80% of preK-12 teachers are white and 76% of university professors are white, then this is how the white patriarchal classic novel, textbook, and article becomes disseminated as the dominant and correct narrative over and over within content areas.

The lack of a counter narrative in higher education means we model that some stories, strategies, and philosophies matter and some don't. The university is erasing stories or denying they exist by not teaching them or by only periodically lightly salting them so one can say proudly, patting themselves on the back, "Look, see here. I taught something multicultural."

Not having access to counter narratives means we are denying students access to inclusive and diverse knowledge and content. As diversity and minority populations are increasing in this country, so are they growing at the university. Not enough, but they are improving. For Black students, those numbers have increased from 10% to 14% since 1976 and for Hispanics from 4% to 18%.¹⁴³

Inclusivity and representation are even *more* paramount if a school's population isn't diverse. A classroom of white males needs to be taught about the political and social impact of the #MeToo movement and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Where and how will our universities students hear those erased stories, voices, and perspectives? The media? According to DiAngelo, 85% of the individuals who decide which news is covered are white.¹⁴⁴

According to the *Washington Examiner*, Generation Z derives their news source primarily from Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Fewer than 10% read newspapers or watch television news. And the survey reported on also found that only 4.6% of Generation Z trusts the media.¹⁴⁵ While social

¹⁴³ National Center for Educational Statistics, "Fast Facts: Post Secondary Enrollment Rates," 2016.

¹⁴⁴ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 31.

¹⁴⁵ Paul Bedard, "Gen Z abandons old media, choose Instagram, YouTube, Facebook," *Washington Examiner*, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/gen-z-abandons-old-media-choose-instagram-youtube-facebook>, February 20, 2018.

media can often be a positive outlet for counter narrative; as we have discovered in these last four years under the Trump administration, it can equally be a source for extremist narratives. Even if students are able to regularly access a reliable media outlet, without a resourceful and educated content expert to help them make sense with structured activities and discussions, how can they make sense and make meaning?

HOW CAN WE ENSURE ACCESS TO COUNTER NARRATIVES?

The Indiana Writers Center's Public Memoir project is committed to writing, publishing, and performing counter narratives. Besides working with youth, the Center also works with other marginalized populations in our city tell their stories—of #BlackLivesMatter, of domestic violence, or living homeless— through the many historic and ongoing public memoir programs we deliver.

Because our program at the Center is a summer learning program focused on composing creative narrative nonfiction writing, we don't want what we do to look or feel like school. For the majority of our students ages 6-16, school has failed them. For our university student interns, school has mostly celebrated them, which is why they have the privilege of accessing a university education. However, writing in a community writing center is very different than writing in school and at the university. There are no assignments or grades. We gather in small circles of poets, playwrights, fiction, and non-fiction writers to teach each other, share work, critique and move towards publication and performance.

We want all of our students, ages 6-16 and university interns to experience what it feels to write like a writer, not a school writer. Real writers don't write for tests or in "timed" writing situations like we see in schools. They write poor first drafts, experimenting with words, style, and genre. They join with other writers to get feedback about what's working and what's not. And ideally, their finished work becomes published and accessible to other readers.

The Center believes that everyone can be a writer and that their words and stories matter. We solicit the counter narrative, not silence it. We even publish many of our community writers work with our independent press, INwords Publications and literary journal, *Flying Island*. The Center is doing something. We do not just “speechify” like Davis warned of. We do something. Our program serves as a resource and repository of stories for its city residents.

Creating access to a community center, not a classroom, is key for the students to experience and learn from the counter narratives in the community and is critical in disrupting the manifested and established master narrative too often taught and learned in the PreK-higher education classroom. In the design and delivery of our counter narrative curriculum, we present and model resistance writing prompts that allow both of our sets of students to write and share stories of hope and hopelessness, challenge and joy, and of #BlackLivesMatter. McFadden speaks to the power and the societal fear of resistance writing with African Americans:

Because script/text is so powerful in terms of human progress, as a tool of communication, of political expression and transformation, writing and being a writer – one who speaks about society either to maintain the status quo or as a Revolutionary—the script has always been deeply contested and remains a dangerous practice for Africans who bring the notion and practice of thought leadership to writing.¹⁴⁶

The resistance writing prompts we generate prompt urgency or exigence. A writing prompt is not the same as a writing topic. The word “prompt,” used as a verb, means to move, to induce, to prepare for action. Our prompts are designed so both of our students not only want to write, but *need* to write.

As part of our instruction at the Center, we teach students that writing comes from three places: your head, your heart, and your gut. Academic writing or as we call it with young students, “school writing,” is from the head. To push words out of your head down to your arm and pour them

¹⁴⁶ Patricia McFadden, “African Thought Leadership: Writing as/for Resistance,” *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 10, no.2, (April 2017): i.

out through your fingertips onto the page is a shorter and easier path than pushing those words up and out of your heart and over to your arm and then moving the words down that long arm to pour then onto page. And the writing that comes from the gut exists in an even deeper place.

We remind students that we aren't writing for school. We will write like real writers, from the heart and from the gut. We talk about what it means to write to resist, to use writing as a way to be heard and also to protest. We want all of our writers to be unsilenced, to scream on paper if they want to or need to. McFaddon again explains that:

if one writes against the status quo – against Patriarchal privilege and plunder; against the exploitation and suppressionand repressive infrastructures of the state which are used to violate and subordinate the working people in the main; if one writes as resistance to unequal and exploitative systems and practices, one becomes vilified and excluded.¹⁴⁷

It's important to us at the Center that we promote and celebrate our young African American voices, their stories, their history. It's equally important that our university interns understand their own privileges and learn from the mouths of babes who do speak to exploitation, suppression, and repression.

To directly engage university students in their own learning, student interns are assigned to one to two community site locations and after the first week are assigned to either round tables or floor writing spaces with students. The student interns remain with this core group for 6 to 8 weeks. Our university students choose their prompts from a list, write their own responses with students in their community centers sitting at tables or on the floor, not in desks and chairs. All writers are encouraged to write to the prompt employing any genre they wish: poetry, in narrative, as lyrics, or as spoken word.

Interns are helping students brainstorm ideas for their own writing, writing with students they are assigned to write with. We teach and model that university interns aren't "teaching," but engaging

¹⁴⁷ Patricia McFaddon, "African Thought Leadership: Writing as/for Resistance," iii.

as a community writer swapping feedback with the students. University interns must gain their student's trust in order to hear intimate and powerful counter narratives about race, violence, politics, and the community in which they, as individuals of privilege, live on the outskirts of, but not in. At the end of each session, university student interns debrief on what was written, heard, and learned. They also must write weekly reflective journal entries where they continue to inquire, wrestle, and make sense of what they are reading, hearing, and seeing.

At the end of the summer learning sessions, the Center publishes each student's self-selected creative narrative nonfiction piece in a series titled, *I Remember: Indianapolis Youth Write About Their Lives* through our independent press, INwords Publications. Students choose what piece or pieces are published. They control the narrative, and it's their narrative that is told. Those voices become permanent. Once on the page, they cannot be erased. Once heard by university interns, they cannot be forgotten.

EXAMPLE COUNTERNARRATIVES COMPOSED BY THE YOUTH IN THE PROGRAM:

Prompt: "Since you asked, I'll tell you why I'm angry..."

Saying My Piece

11-year old African American female

Since you asked, I'll tell you why I'm so angry. I'm angry because there is so much harm and danger in the world, and I can't really do anything about it since I am just one person. All of the pollution is caused by us humans. No one is trying to fix or undo their mistakes. I want to make a difference in the world, but it's really hard because it's just going to keep occurring.

I know whoever is reading this is thinking, "Oh, this is just some silly 11-year old who doesn't know what she is talking about. The thing is— what you don't know— is that I am truly passionate about this. It is not okay that we are endangering our environment!

If we keep littering, smoking, and building, our trees will start dying. We don't want our trees to die because eventually, we won't have any more trees. Without trees, our oxygen supply will start to deplete, and our humanity rate will quickly deplete and eventually there will be no humans left on Earth.

Also, I haven't even mentioned the animals in the seas and on the Earth. There are already many sea turtles that are endangered because of us. Our city lights are affecting baby turtles

after they hatch. Instead of going towards the water, they go towards roads and buildings where they quickly get run over and don't even get a chance to live their lives.

There is so much more that I have to say, but I just wanted to hit a few points in this piece. After you have read this piece, I hope you will take caution with your actions when it comes to our environment. I hope you put this piece into your thoughts.

So please, watch your thoughts because they become words.
Watch your words because they become your actions.
Watch your actions because they become your habits.
Watch your habits because they become your character.
Watch your character, because it becomes your destiny.

The daily debriefing sessions can lead to some uncomfortable, yet poignant conversations. For example, the university interns were struck by this young person's passion for the environment. One white intern said out loud what I suspect others were thinking: "I didn't realize African Americans cared as much about the environment as I did." This led to a discussion on why she had made that assumption. I remind them that engaging in tough talk and being uncomfortable is important to their learning, and I want them to ask or share anything they question or don't know or take issue with.

This conversation about Black people and the environment then led to further investigations and discussions about the lack of recycling options within many of the city's apartment complexes where most of our students reside. In following up with this young writer, she explained that she was upset about her inability to recycle at home. In talking with the community site partners, there was a proposal initiated for how to create recycling community drop off locations for these complexes.

Prompt: Tell us about what makes you really mad?"

Racism

11-year old African American male

I want to bring up racism. So, the two people I think have a big history with racism are Donald Trump and Hitler.

Donald Trump wants to get rid of all the Mexicans. Hitler wanted to get rid of the Jews.

Donald Trump tried to block the Mexicans from coming to the United States of America. But he failed.

Hitler wanted to kill all the Jews. But he failed too.

They both failed, because we worked together to stop them. If we work together, we can end racism for good. That is why we need to continue fighting racism, to end it for good.¹⁴⁸

The interns were struck with this piece because of its use of metaphor, comparing Trump to Hitler, and the students style use of simple, yet commanding sentences that yield a rhythm, helping to reinforce the message. They were equally struck by how serious this young man was in composing this piece. He was a student that was hard to get focused and settled and who wanted to joke and be with his friends instead of write. But once he had the right prompt, his writing came through. Because as McFaddon suggests earlier, resistance and resistance writing aren't normalized practices and vilified for African Americans so resistance writing takes time.

We invited local African American literary writer, Angela Jackson Brown, to model her writing in a session. She read aloud her resistance poetry, showing how she uses writing to protest the police brutality in the African American community. She explains resistance poetry as:

A popular art form at protests and rallies. Resistance poems capture the speaker's rage at the modern world along with their desire to resist oppression. From the civil rights and women's liberation movements to Black Lives Matter, resistance poetry is commanding enough to gather crowds in a city square and compact enough to demand attention on social media and college classrooms. Speaking truth to power remains a crucial role of the poet in the face of political and media rhetoric designed to obscure, manipulate, or worse.¹⁴⁹

An excerpt of the one of poems she read as an example, titled, "I Must Not Breathe" is below:

*If I am stopped by the cops I must be quiet. I must not breathe.
I must not ask questions. I must not breathe.
I must not move.
I must not breathe. I must not talkback.
I must be compliant. I must not breathe.
I must not film the cop.
I must not call family or friends. I must not breathe.
I must not put my hands up or down. I must not breathe.
I must cooperate. I must be docile.*

¹⁴⁸ Darolyn Jones, ed., *I Remember: Indianapolis Youth Write about Their Lives*, (Indianapolis, IN: INwords Publications, 2019), 120.

¹⁴⁹ Angela Jackson-Brown. Resistance Poetry Lecture for Indiana Writers Center at Ball State University, July 25, 2019.

*I must stay in the car or get out, depending on the mood of the cop.*¹⁵⁰

After sharing other examples from poets such as Langston Hughes, Gil Scott-Heron, and Maya Angelou, Jackson-Brown then asked the students questions about what they want to protest and resist. Many answers were given including racism, discrimination, police brutality, and poverty. She then asked students to give ideas about what they could protest and resist from their own media sources and in their communities.

Many student examples were provided in response to Jackson-Brown, such as Disney movies and lack of representation, lack of public transportation, and school police officers. As this conversation developed and took tangents, an example was presented by a 10-year old African American female that truly impacted the university student interns.

She said that in the popular movie, *Toy Story*, Andy oversees the toys. When Andy is not there, the toys can be who they really are and do what they really want. She explained that when she is with predominantly white students or adults, it's like Andy is in the room. When she's at home in her community with her family, she can be who she really wants to be. You could see a visible inhale from all of the adults in the room and even some tears shed by my interns. Most folks had never considered what seemed like a benign role of this character in this popular film series.

That day with Jackson-Brown, an African American, as their teacher, the students did speak and write more freely than they did with the white university interns despite the fact that the interns had been working closely with the students for five weeks. My university student interns didn't want to think of themselves as an "Andy," but the students reacted and wrote differently for a Black teacher than they had for the white interns.

¹⁵⁰ Angela Jackson-Brown, "I Must Not Breathe," *When Women Waken: A Journal of Poetry, Prose, & Images by Women*, <http://www.whenwomenwaken.org/i-must-not-breathe-by-angela-jackson-brown/>, September 1, 2015.

Below is a poem composed that day by one of the students based on a prompt asking them to write their own protest poem. This was a quiet student who always actively wrote and complied to directions given. She often corrected her Black dialect when speaking with us or when writing, but that day, she resisted because no Andy was in charge, and she wrote to resist freely.

No Ordinary Day; No Ordinary Message
12-year old African American Female

I don't usually share my feelings, but today is different. It's not any ordinary day—it's a day to be explicit.

Im'a tell you how I feel, but hold on, here's the deal, you can't tell anyone else because this is for real.

When I was younger, I didn't really understand, but now I am older and it's time for me to take a stand. I need to be the change I want to see in the world, and you don't have to listen, but this is my mission.

I stand for what I believe in so you can quit denying the fact that you need to cut the act and start giving back to what you stole from our economy; the bare soil from down under me because now our Earth is dying and you are still denying the fact that you need to cut the act, because you're still spreading hate and you won't stop until you see the fate of your own human race and I hope you are starting to realize that soon there won't be any blue skies because the number of trees that we use to breathe will start to deplete, well at least retreat.

Oh wait! Y'all still wanna shoot and kill? Hold up, what's the deal? What's going through your brain that makes you think it's ok to take others away from their families, to make other people flee from what they thought was home, and leave them all alone?

No, it's not ok. No, it's not the right way. No, this isn't any ordinary day. No, it's the day you will repay for the hole you dug inside of my heart. And yeah, this is nothing but smarts that is coming straight from the brain because every day I feel this constant pain because of you—because of what you did to this Earth. This is the only one we have, and we need to make it last because there is nothing else like it and I cannot deny it. So, you need to take care of it because we are all sharing it.

So yeah, you might think I'm an ordinary 12-year-old girl, who likes pink and pearls. Nope, this is what I like—standing up for what I believe in. So you can quit denying and start complying because hey, I'm not lying. So don't get mad at me for sharing with you, the change I want to see and now I am done. I know that I have won. So stop spreading hate; this is not a debate!

COUNTERNARRATIVE EVALUATIONS COMPOSED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS:

The results of border crossing, removed from the university classroom, learning counter narratives are illustrated below as excerpts from the university intern's end-of-summer evaluations, a summative writing exercises from their formative weekly journal entries.

University White Male:

Evaluation Prompt: Tell the story about something that happened during our summer site session with our students that made you think WOW! What did you like best about it? Why?

When he wrote about someone or something that he loved so dearly that he would be devastated to lose, he took just a moment to think and began scratching his pencil against the paper. After about thirty minutes, he presented his paper to me. It was nearly entirely filled with words. What I read left me amazed, impressed, proud, and overall just WOW.

He had written an intensely passionate confession about how much he cherished his mom and dad and the irrevocable pain he would experience if he ever lost either of them. Reading about his special concern regarding his military father who is frequently away or the detail about how his heart would sink, lower and lower past his feet, never to return to where it's meant to be, if he lost a parent shattered my own heart and evoked such an immense pride for him. The high caliber, honesty, and detail of his writing sharply stuck out to me, and still does.

In discussing this evaluation, he shared how close he was with his own parents and how accepting and supporting they have been of all of his unconventional decisions in life. He admitted that prior to this internship, he did work under the assumption that most of these children would come from broken homes or be living with a single mother or with a grandmother. I queried why he assumed that, and he said this is what he heard so often on the media, about Black men being in prison and women or grandparents taking care of the children left behind. He really didn't think there would be children living in poverty who had both parents and both parents working. This led to a discussion of course about our class system where the ability to migrate up to middle is harder and harder as the gap increases. Because my husband is retired military, and I used to assist and work with new military families, I shared with him how there are many enlisted military families who still need food stamps and other assistance because they do not make enough in the military. Yes, being in the military is a

more guaranteed job, but the military like any other government or bureaucratic institution is still impacted by racism.

Evaluation Prompt: Tell the story about something that happened during our summer site session with our students that made you think, UGH! What was the worst thing about it? Why?

A little girl, no older than eleven, was writing about how she felt less than because of the president, how Trump hated her and people who looked like her, and how overwhelmingly unwelcome she felt in her own country. She attacked the broken, unfulfilled promises of our government, and questioned how the president could hate his own people when he should love them. A little girl wrote all of that. I couldn't have felt more disappointed and ashamed in our country. Someone so young should never have to experience any of that discrimination and hate, and to read her own words, to discover how aware and in tune with reality she was, absolutely broke my heart. As a country, we can, and must, do better. These children deserve *so* much better, and somehow, we keep failing them. Nothing could make me think UGH more fiercely.

This response showed up over and over in the evaluation. In debriefing after the evaluations, several interns were surprised about how many of the students wrote about politics and how well-informed they were considering that most PreK-12 schools aren't actively teaching topics such as racism or politics. Again, this led to discussions of how young people are listening and learning all the time and are invested in their futures. They hear their families and community talking about these issues, they watch the news, they are on social media. As an educator, I know that students are incredible absorbers of information, particularly with topics they are interested in or have a stake in.

University Black Male Student

Evaluation Prompt: Tell the story about something that happened to you this summer during our summer site sessions with our students. It can be something funny, something sad, something brave, any one something that stood out for you, that you distinctly remember.

In working with three young high school females who were struggling with how to find the words to say what they really wanted, I learned more about the Black female struggle.

1. As young Black women, they know they live in a world that would try to silence them, and that if they didn't tell their story, who would? Anybody could try, but they would never get it right.
2. Writing can be a method of processing emotions, and oftentimes writers, like other artists, are hyper-emotional, so what they are doing is totally in line with what writers do. They're feelings are valid and nobody can speak on those feelings they have but them.

3. Repetition, whether if in message or literal wording, is a tool often employed by writers for subjects important to them. So that school essay-writing thing with avoiding repetition in schools isn't representative!

I'd like to think of that as possibly being the most profound moment I've had in this role, which made me reallyreallyreally [sic] excited about what I was doing. By all means, my words may not have had any effect on those three students, but I feel like their choice to continue with their subject despite initial concerns is a sign that my words were at least encouraging and/or well-received.

I loved this response, because while this young man grew up in the community we were in and knew what it meant to grow up Black and underserved in this community, he learned a new counter narrative. His new awareness of how young, Black women feel. Reciprocally, he taught me something too. I was so focused on the African American youth counter narrative that I forgot to think about gender and the role of young Black women and young Black men in their individual gender roles within these communities.

University White Female Student

Evaluation Prompt: Capture how this experience will impact your future career choices and professional work.

As a preservice teacher, I'm acutely aware of the strange magic kids can bring to the world. However, during my time applying, interviewing, and finally working for the Indiana Writers Center, I had too many conversations with people who were underwhelmed by the concept of children writing memoirs—almost as though a life lived seven or eight years isn't a life worth telling about.

But the truth is that these kids taught me more than I taught them. They had more to say than we could ever have the time or space to hear. They had stories of love, loss, and the intricacies of their everyday lives. They had stories with happy endings, and stories whose happy endings hadn't come yet, and may never come. They had so much to share about their fears, their hopes, their anxieties, and their strengths. They had opinions that were entirely their own. All it took was asking the right questions, giving them the right space, and inviting them with three simple words....*Tell me more.*

This response was poignant because of the intern's awareness of how connected we all are. She saw these students not as students to be taught, but as humans. We have all felt love and loss. We all have hopes and fears. And we all have opinions. As a future teacher, she learned to stop

talking and instead listen. If she is struggling to know or teach a student, she learned that by simply asking, *Tell me more...*, she invites counter narratives into the master narrative space.

Black Female University Student

Evaluation Prompt: Tell the story about something that happened during our summer site session with our students that made you think WOW! What did you like best about it? Why?

During one of our sessions, I was able to share the story about being a Black girl, struggling with confidence in my natural hair journey. It was my first time I had ever written or shared my thoughts and feelings out loud for people to know. While writing this on this topic, I knew that I had to make it seem relatable for the girls in our session. I knew that it would help them whether it was that day, the next day, or even next year; to be confident in their own hair.

What I did not know was going to happen, was that one of the students would feel confident in that exact moment to write about her own journey with her natural hair. Her story was very authentic as she described what she has dealt with and how she responds to the people who try to tear her down. I was in shock because I did not realize the impact that my story could have on one student, that same day to share her story. We have to tell OUR stories, the ones that matter to us.

This African American intern grew up in a middle-class home with two professional parents. She attended a primarily white, preparatory high school and was always a high achieving student. She was told on more than one occasion by our students that she didn't sound Black. She felt awkward about that and shared that sometimes her family says the same thing. She said that once she's back around her family, her home language comes back. But she felt she should play the role of university student, not her family self. I talked with her about bell hooks and how when she left and went away to college and returned home, her knowledge, beliefs, and language had changed and she had to learn how to operate with her family in a new circle of conversation.¹⁵¹

When the female African American intern wrote about her hair as a model prompt for students, she opened up a so many conversations and quickly became a very popular intern. Again, the girls starting writing about their hair and wanted to work with her or have her read their pieces.

¹⁵¹ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. (New York: Routledge, 2003).

This intern told me that she never got to talk about her hair at her all white school and rarely at the university as she is often the only Black girl in a space. She began proudly wearing her hair natural and using her own home language more around the university student interns, learning to navigate these two sides of her own master and counter narratives.

CONCLUSION

Teachers of writing at any age, grade, or academic level are notorious for teaching students to “show, not tell.” Angela Davis similarly says, “don’t speechify; do something!” Yet, I see many individuals in education giving this lip service with little, real action unless it serves a publication, public relations, or preservation purpose. Unless we teach students explicitly, modeling and showing them strategies for how to show, not tell, for how to do something, instead of just saying something...how will they learn? Unless we seek counter narrative content and design a counter narrative curriculum, how will they learn?

This program gives university students the opportunity to not just talk about activism, but do something, to show activism. And they get to experience authentic counter narratives. We are not erasing; we are not silencing. The young writers and the university students get to break away from the fetters of the hegemony and speak and write freely. Having access to, even soliciting, and subsequently learning the truth is the end goal. And it should be the goal and more importantly, outcome, of every responsible educator.

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