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Working Towards a Racially Inclusive Studio

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What is your role in creating a
racially inclusive Studio?

—

Dee Payton, Justine Dombrowski and Tian Qing Yen

Preface

It can be tricky to be a Studio Assistant. We often walk a fine line between editing and advising, between peer and employee. It can be hard to tell where your job ends and you begin.

Like in many parts of life, we face scenarios that test us. Most of these situations aren't cut and dry, and this exercise isn't meant to tell you the right and wrong ways to address an interaction. What we ask is that you critically examine your role in the studio, and explore ways you can help promote an inclusive space.

As you work through this lab, keep an open mind: every choice has its own set of drawbacks and benefits. While the end goal is to create an inclusive and diverse space for learning, there are many different ways to get there.

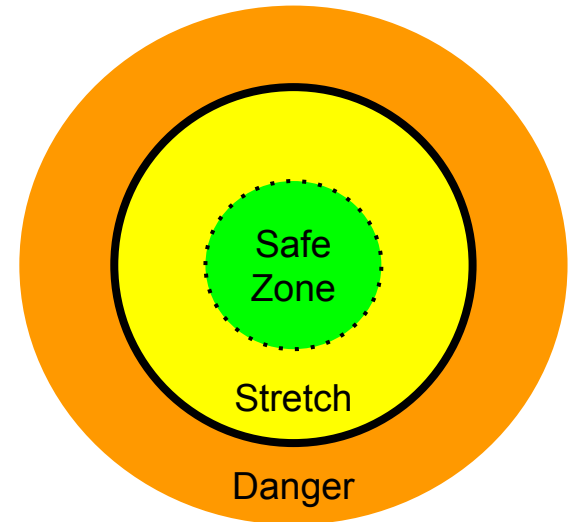
Goals and Take-aways

1. To recognize that **racial inequality is an issue** in the field of peer tutoring in writing (and at large), and can make accessing our services more difficult
2. To provide participants with a framework to **identify and talk about racial inequality** in learning spaces
3. To introduce a scaffolding **system for educating staff** on confronting racism and microaggressions
4. To apply knowledge of racism in the context of learning spaces and **leave with actionable next steps**

Before we get started...

In this lab, we look at the effects of racial microaggressions on inclusivity. This can be a difficult topic, so here are some ground rules to keep in mind when discussing this lab with others:

- Respect the boundaries of yourself and others
- Trust the intentions of others, while acknowledging the impacts of their words
- Ouch/Oops
 - If something hurts, say so!
 - If you make a mistake, apologize
- Step up, Step back
 - Acknowledge different experiences and identities
 - Address the content, not the individual
 - Be aware of your place in the room



Defining Terms

Race is a social construct that is culturally associated with an inherited physical characteristic, particularly skin color.

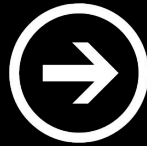
Racism is racial prejudice that is in combination with community, institutional, and/or systemic power.

Implicit Biases are attitudes or stereotypes that affect our decisions and behavior in an unconscious manner; they encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments of individuals, and are activated involuntarily.

Experience changes how we interact with and use language in our everyday lives. The same is true of the terms above. Let's take a second look at the word "race" as an example.

Even though it might seem like the terms **race**, **racism**, **microaggression**, and **implicit bias** have pretty straight-forward definitions, these terms are dynamic . . .

We can ask a number of questions just about the term **race**...



The take-away here is

We discriminate upon the basis of race.

What is race?

- Is it socially constructed, or is it something that exists as an objective, “real” feature of our world?
- What does it *mean* to say that race is a social construct?
- How many races are there, and who (or what) determines this?
- What does it mean to be a “member” of a race? Do you have to have certain genealogical characteristics, or is it also a matter of how other people treat you?

Racial Discrimination in the Studio

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights snubs or insults (intentional or unintentional), which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.

Here are two examples of microaggressions that could occur in interactions:

Choosing to focus on correctness of language in an essay when the writer has asked for help with content

This is a microaggression because it emphasizes that one form of English is inferior to another, and reinforces a sense of “otherness,” particularly with multilingual writers.

Assuming a writer does or does not have background knowledge on a subject based on their race or appearance.

This is a microaggression because it assumes something about the intelligence of an individual based on their perceived identity.

Now let's look at a more involved scenario.

Biased Bailey

A student named Bailey comes in seeking help finding and using sources for a paper in which he is trying to argue that African-Americans have health problems because their diet consists heavily of fried chicken. So far, the writer has found a website that talks about high rates of heart disease in African Americans and a scientific paper linking foods with high fat and oil content to heart diseases, but they're admittedly not quite finished with their research. The topic just doesn't sit well with you, but you still want to help.

What are the pros and cons of each of these responses?

Carry on with the conference and address the writer's concerns.

Point out their weak thesis and suggest broadening it, perhaps to avoid being misunderstood.

Address the racist undertones implied by their thesis and ask what brought them to this conclusion.

Follow-up Questions

1. What is the microaggression in this scenario (try and be as specific as possible in naming it)?
2. What are the risks associated with speaking up or choosing to confront these issues? What are the potential risks of not saying anything?
3. Given your current amount of education/experience, did you feel adequately prepared to address your scenario?

Tutor Taylor

You are working the late night shift and your coworker, Taylor, has been conferencing with two different students on editing and proofreading. You notice that when they work with the native english-speaking white student, Taylor talks one way, but when they work with the multilingual student of color, Taylor adopts an affected tone of voice, speaking slowly and simply as if to a child. The multilingual student does not seem to be responding well to this, and looks unengaged and uncomfortable.

Now it's your turn to come up with a response to this scenario!

Here are some questions to keep in mind while brainstorming responses.

What about this situation makes it racist?
(Try and label it!)

How do power dynamics appear in this scenario?

What other conditions would change how you might respond? (for example, intentionality of writer, familiarity with co-worker, etc...)

Hopefully you've realized by now that

Confrontation is difficult.

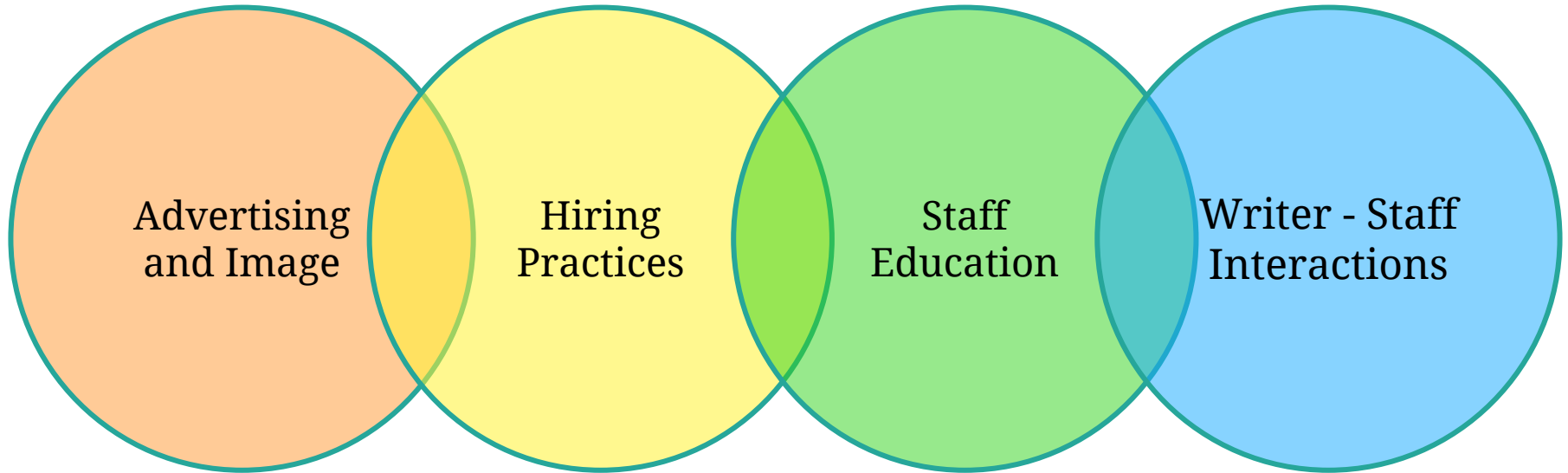
Like other skills, confrontation takes practice!

Here are some tips to help scaffold the learning process:

1. Give yourself time to process
2. Continue a dialogue about racism
3. Establish support systems for people who feel unsafe
4. Create systems of feedback (between writers, staff members, and directors)

Racism is present at all stages

It's important to be aware that racism begins much earlier than just in writer-staff interactions. How might racism manifest in each of these stages?



So what is your role in creating an inclusive learning space?

Think critically, examine implications, listen, and take action.

Navigating the wild and wonderful world of peer tutoring is as confusing as it is exciting, and your challenge is to find the best way to represent the Studio and yourself. We encourage you to stay critical of your own (and others') actions, but also to keep kindness in mind. Rather than assuming you know the whole backstory to a situation, ask questions, listen fervently, and start a meaningful conversation.

THANKS!

