

Washington State University College of Education

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Will defend the dissertation

Date: March 29, 2018

Time: 1:00 P.M.

Location: Pullman – Cleveland 160A

Faculty, students and the general public are encouraged to attend.

Language, Knowledge, and Power in a Composition Program: Applying Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, and Decolonial Scholarship to a Participatory Action Research Project

Chair: Paula Price Groves

For this study, I explored how Washington State University's Composition Program might further equip faculty to address the relationships of language, knowledge, and power—specifically as connected to whiteness, normativity, and colonization—within a composition class. Much scholarship within rhetoric and composition addresses these relationships in a theoretical sense (Alexander & Rhodes, 2011; Smitherman, 2015; Villanueva, 1997, 2004). Some additional scholarship discusses how individual scholars apply these theories to their classrooms (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014; Driskill, 2015; Gubele, 2015; Perryman-Clark, 2015). However, almost no scholarship discusses how to further equip teachers to address issues of language and power at the programmatic level. This programmatic piece is crucial, as otherwise individual teachers committed to this work are potentially left to address language, knowledge, and power on their own, a task that places the largely contingent workforce of first-year composition teachers in a precarious position. This project builds on the current theoretical and pedagogical scholarship to address the preparation and professional development of composition teachers program-wide.

Because there is a clear need to address the relationships between language, knowledge, and power at a programmatic level, I utilized a Participatory Action Research methodology that allowed me to collaboratively work with experienced composition teachers at WSU. Together, we 1) studied the ways our program might further equip teachers to teach the relationships among language, knowledge, and power; and 2) took action steps toward improving this preparation at the programmatic level so all teachers may engage in this work. We therefore asked the following action research question: How can the WSU Composition Program further equip all teachers in the program to teach the relationships among language, knowledge, and power? As we examined these relationships, we were also cognizant of how writing itself can reinforce racist, colonial, and normative practices (Alexander & Rhodes, 2011; Kynard, 2015; Villanueva, 1997, 2004)—even as composition teachers attempt to enact liberatory, critical pedagogies in the classroom. Because I chose to examine—and hopefully help disrupt—composition's complicity in dominant discourse, I intentionally turned to critical race theory, decolonial scholarship, and queer theory as the theoretical framework that guided this project.