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Reality Pedagogy in the First-Year Composition Classroom

> Writing instructors need to assist their students to discover public writing as a way of 'taking part in a community of discourse' and private writing as a means for writing better reflectively.
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> —Peter Elbow, "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience"

In this essay, I take lessons from Christopher Emdin's 2017 book on reality pedagogy, a book that includes his experience teaching in urban classroom settings in America, and implement some of the methods in my own class of first-year composition students in Lincoln, Nebraska. Teaching there, and with this pedagogical lens in mind, I realize I must often consider the personal histories of my students, many of whom come from rural backgrounds that are very different from the ones described in the text. My interest in utilizing this pedagogical practice is to develop a pedagogy that is relevant to students in methodology and practice, allowing them to understand the deeper issues at hand in their daily interactions with the world and with what they consume in various forms of media. I will also consider how these issues interact with each other and as a way to empower students to understand critical thinking as an adaptable skill set that works outside of the classroom just as intentionally as within. One of the leading challenges with this approach regards interactions that, in secondary education, affords the teacher many more opportunities to engage with students. Throughout the course of my exploration, I've noted the challenges and successes that have come with adapting this model of learning to this context.

I first became aware of Christopher Emdin's book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...And the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* during my time at the 2019 PAMLA Conference in San Diego, California where I attended several panels on composition and rhetoric. As a first-time teacher of composition, the panels gave me the opportunity to learn more about the field I was entering, and one presentation that struck my interest in particular was focused on composition in high school dual-enrollment classes in which high school students are allowed to enroll in college courses for credit prior to their graduation. I tried my best to scribble what I could remember from the panelists' speedy talk. Words like "white people" and "teaching" and "hood" were scratched down in pen markings on a little note pad. Between notes, I listened as the panelist explained the ways that Emdin's teachings worked effectively to reach high school students in urban areas of Southern California. What I wondered as I sat in my seat was about how effective these same lessons might be for my own teaching situation as I would return to a life as a graduate teaching assistant at a predominantly white institution in the Midwest, seemingly the exact opposite terrain to Emdin and his course of study.

Once I returned to campus with the ideas of reality pedagogy lingering in my mind, I placed an order for the book shortly after.

Christopher Emdin's book *For White Folks...* focuses on high school educators whose classroom environments are situated in low-income communities across the United States. *For White Folks...* begins with what can be learned from the Carlisle School, a Pennsylvania boarding school built in 1879 whose intention was to make Indigenous Americans "as close to the white man as possible" (4). Emdin suggests that the teachers of The Carlisle School are not very different from the "white folk" who teach in the hood today. In the preface to his book, Emdin explains how the "white folk" that he refers to throughout are not only white people. Instead, Emdin explains that "white folk" can include anyone and should be understood as an individual who chooses to "maintain a system that doesn't serve the needs of youth in the hood" (viii). This distinction makes clear that the teachers of the Carlisle School were misguided in their approach to education and that those who teach in a similar manner are not too far off, either. Though they exist at very different times, they are both misguided. His explanation is that anyone who teaches with a Eurocentric pedagogy is doing the work of an oppressor and are therefore said "white folk." Emdin's book is not only targeted at teachers. He also draws attention to the failings of educational systems that result in well-meaning individuals not being able to fully carry out their intentions of doing good and making a difference. Emdin does not suggest complete educational reform; instead, he writes the book "for those who work with them ["white folk"], hire them, whose family members are taught by them, and who themselves are being, or have been, taught by them" (vii). By doing so, I believe Emdin's desire is to trade any savior complex that these teachers might enter the classroom with in favor of a model that is best intended to serve these students.

Emdin details the failings of The Carlisle School and goes on to claim some of the major failings of that administration before making a connection with students in "the hood." He describes the similarities between the Carlisle students, identifying them by their indigenous history, and the experience of students in urban areas, identifying them as the neoindigenous. Emdin states, "as long as traditional teaching promotes an imaginary white middle-class ideal," these students should be seen as being from a perspective outside of the majority, thus the neoindigenous identity (9). The hood, in Emdin's opinion, is a space that "may be urban, rural, densely or sparsely populated, but it has a number of shared characteristics that make it easy to recognize. The community is often socioeconomically disadvantaged, achievement gaps are prevalent, and a very particular brand of pedagogy is normalized (viii)."

Just like the students from The Carlisle School, Emdin writes, "the neoindigenous often look, act, and engage in the classroom in ways that are inconsistent with traditional school norms" (9). In specific ways, this relates directly to students in urban areas and I think of whether this can be attributed to students from vastly different backgrounds or first-gen college students as well. In the effort of feeding this interest, I begin to implement some of the methods that Emdin suggests in my own classes. Emdin credits the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant

pedagogy— an approach to teaching that takes into consideration the culture of the students to determine different ways they should be evaluated.

As an instructor of first-year composition at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, my classrooms have included students with a litany of backgrounds. Students come from rural communities, metropolitan communities, and even from abroad to study here, leaving me with the earnest intention to design a class that remains relevant and engaging with students. Emdin suggests that through "classroom colonialism," students have learned to conform to the expectations of historically oppressive systems of learning (14). What stands in the way of being fully able to take into consideration the approaches of Emdin's book is the differing landscapes of education in high school and college. With the experience of first-year writing being so close to students' previous high school experiences, these classes are among the first that many of them take. At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, graduate teaching assistants do not assist with teaching; they are instructors of their class and can operate, within reason, how they see fit. Because this is the case, knowing how I could best approach teaching that meets students on their own cultural turf has been an interest from the onset. We start off with a guide on how to read like a college student. I assign Gita DasBender's "Critical Thinking in College Writing: From the Personal to the Academic," a chapter from *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing,* Volume 2. DasBender focuses on core elements of critically engaging with a text, some of which include practicing attentive reading, listing important ideas, and writing a personal response as a method of furthering one's understanding. I tell the students that this guide will be one we come back to often throughout the semester. The document is denser than I take into consideration. On the first day of discussion, students are hesitant to raise their hands and participate. Even after asking if they've read the work, there aren't any volunteers to offer up ideas. The reading for the day suggests strategies on how to apply skills of critical thinking to rhetorical analysis, the first writing project of the semester. In this moment, in that silent classroom, I learn to offer my own difficulties with understanding a text and see a change in our conversations.

I decide against asking questions with finite answers and choose instead to ask about questions regarding the process of reading and comprehension. Instead of asking a very pointed question about subtext or meaning, I ask the students to think about what they believe they know about the text and how or why. Both questions, while simple, remain rooted in analysis while weaving elements of close reading and discussion of finding evidence to back up our beliefs, even if—or especially when—those beliefs change. Some of the value in this activity works to highlight the ways their ideas are fluid.

The class moves away from academic text to a work of fiction in the next lesson, and this time it's Zadie Smith's "Martha, Martha." We discuss the ways that Smith paints a picture of race and wealth with how Pam treats, misinterprets, and is concerned about Martha as she's looking for an apartment. The story has some appeal to the class because Pam is described as being from the Midwest, like so many of my students. The learning objective for this session is to deconstruct this piece of fiction to see how it works. I start with story because narrative arcs possess universal

elements to their composition: a beginning, a middle, and an end. What I'm interested in my students paying close attention to is how a writer like Smith moves through her ideas, focusing on character, themes of trauma, and place. When I work at the whiteboard with students, I ask them about what "moves" the author makes throughout a text, whether this is with a student text or published text. I stop to highlight parts of the text that are strange. I bring to their attention how Pam's Midwestern nature manifests itself in the text. Some of my students identify with the ideals she carries, claim that every subject is not open for discussion in this region, and, because we are in a classroom discussion, I hope that these students feel more comfortable acknowledging these tensions. We spend time working with close reading, going from paragraph to paragraph charting the clues the writer leaves until we've constructed a web of connection through the plot. I tell the students this story is about life after the September 11th attacks – many of them have no memory of this tragedy. One student was actually born on that day. This is just another story to them. I don't know how to rhetorically analyze this information.

In terms of cosmopolitanism, Emdin writes, "the goal for the teacher is to create a classroom environment where the same joy, celebration, and camaraderie that come at the end of the school year are present in the classroom throughout the academic year" (113). This seems more of a daunting challenge in the first-year writing classroom because of the different ways that students enter the space. Students might come to the class on nontraditional terms, they might be part-time, they could be older than their peers, have families, or they may be going back to school instead of attending for the first time. Though, Emdin's idea of cosmo duos might be more adaptable. Cosmo duos are pairs of students that come together to keep one another accountable in their work. One way to create this kind of environment is to assign students to be peer-review partners. After the first few weeks of class, after observing the different personalities the students have, I like to pair of my students into peer-review partners with the responsibility of championing for each other's work. This means that each partner will be working to carefully read their partner's writing, give generative feedback during the drafting stages, and write a detailed response to their peer's writing before they submit their final draft to me. Along the way, the reviewer will submit the work to me so that when I read the final draft I can also understand how the student was responding to the feedback and what challenges they were working through in this assignment.

Part of the feedback students give appears in the form of a peer-review letter. The peer-review letter functions as a space for the students to converse with one another about their observations and remaining questions about each other's writing. Because this is also a text worth a grade, there are still required elements that need explanation, like that each should be a particular length, that students should quote directly from their peer's work, and that each student should provide an explanation of what they believe is motivating the essay. Generally speaking, there seem to be two ways that students approach this undertaking. There is the overly-personal approach, which includes students writing in direct response to their peer who is maybe a friend or someone they only want to give praise to. These papers will say things like, "I don't know exactly how you plan to do the thing you've set out to, but I know you'll kill it." Then, there is the overly critical

approach, an approach that only sees this requirement as another task that is to be turned in to the instructor. Students with this method will write letters that fail to address their peer at all and only highlight the failings of their draft, which I remind them is only a draft. I want students to learn that critical thinking and kindness are not mutually exclusive and that they can be critical of the people and things that they care for. Students do not hold their tongue when critiquing a former student's writing and, though I have removed the names from these essays, I remind students that these papers have a person and a mind attached to them and that they should remember that no act of writing is disembodied.

In terms of context and content, Emdin suggests further learning the ways of the neoindigenous to learn how they communicate and what is important to them. This applies to lesson planning and what material is used in developing ideas for the classroom. For one class period, I chose "Feels Like Summer" by Childish Gambino as our focus for the day's class. The song and the music video served as the two primary texts for our analysis. Most of the students were familiar with the artist and the song, but the articles and video essays I had them watch to accompany the text were new for all of them. By bringing in this kind of text, students were able to further understand that rhetorical analysis could be adapted to every context we come across in life, whether an essay or a Billboard top-100 record. This has led to students bringing ideas and topics that I might never have made connections to myself, like the one student who wanted to write about the connections between mental health issues and online video game streamers, or another student who wanted to analyze the political implications of a Taylor Swift song. By having texts like these lead our discussion, the world-at-large became more dissectible. Soon, we were able to have conversations about non-literary texts more frequently. I found this effort effective in understanding what my students enjoyed, such as what kind of music they listened to and their activities with gaming or recreational sports. In their assignment feedback, many of them wrote that they were thankful to write on subjects that interested them and that this freedom kept them more engaged in the drafting stages.

Emdin's writing about competition in the classroom compels me. He writes, "I suggest that educators implement a teaching and learning model that positions novices as no different from experts. . .By implementing this model, the individualistic and competition-driven nature of traditional schooling is replaced by teaching and learning that creates cultural learning experiences" (157). Perhaps this is the greatest place of contention I have come to in the book. The university model does not currently provide a space for these students to achieve what Emdin has set out.

Curation deals with a lot of the material context that is already present in college classrooms. Curation deals mostly with adapting ways that students can learn and participate with multimodal projects and points of reference like video or computer and internet access. This is more important to the contexts within which the author writes than the one in which I currently teach, though it is worth reconsidering how students will get credit for the work that they turn in. One of the most effective ways to undertake this opportunity has been in utilizing online

discussion posts and responses. In my classes, I've given students the opportunity to look back to some of the themes we've already addressed in the syllabus and find their own readings or articles that interest them to bring to discussion. Then, students read and respond to their peers' readings and I choose a variety of postings to bring into class for large-group discussion. I choose a handful of students each day to add to the large-group discussion we have in person.

I choose to sit in the back of the classroom during student presentations, and what I notice sitting amongst my students is how much they expect me to be the only voice they are addressing. Most of them look directly at me and I try to look across the room at their peers—a reminder that their research is in conversation with the world around them and that they are also contributing to others' understanding of how to undertake the project as well. Perhaps the greatest result of having the student at the front of the classroom during their presentations is that we all can raise our hands with questions or comments. I'm pleasantly surprised when, in my class of sophomores, I often have to worry about how many students can present in a day because the conversation between students is so lively. These students have taken a sincere interest in the work of their peers, many of whom they have had the opportunity to work with in small groups. The groups my students work in are often varied. The ideal situation is to get students with disparate topics to work together, as was the case with two of my students—one writing about masculinity and the other about feminism.

At other times, I've held student-facilitated discussion days where I'll assign readings for the class, separate the students into groups of three, and then task them with analyzing their assigned text and generating questions for discussion. In these student-facilitated discussions, we all rearrange the seats into a circle so everyone is facing each other. The intention of getting students to work in this way is to allow them to understand that their audience goes beyond just me as the instructor. When they have to look at one another while sitting in a circle, I can see the empathetic faces of students who abhor the awkward silences. In these moments, students who have been silent most of the semester chime in, not because they feel obliged but out of respect for their fellow student. I come to understand, as Emdin suggests, "the key to becoming an effective educator is acknowledging the differences between students and teacher and adjusting one's teaching accordingly, which often requires nontraditional approaches to teaching and learning" (83).

I love playing the role of student in these discussions as the leaders occasionally try to pick my brain for thoughts. I refrain from being too leading, and even outright deflect some of their questions when too many are fixed my way. I hope to develop lines of communication between students that will help those who might not understand the material on any given day to build a rapport with a classmate to study. During individual conferences, the students all respond that the additional feedback on their presentations helped them in working toward their project and gave them questions to answer.

What Christopher Emdin has given us with his book is insight to realities we can often overlook. Seeing how to improve student engagement must begin with a student-centric pedagogy, and reality pedagogy is an effective way to understanding how to put your students at the center of lesson planning. I would recommend Emdin's book to those who teach first-year composition and advise they look for what is most adaptable to their situation at hand. The most effective mode of getting students involved is centered on shifting the power dynamic in the classroom and learning as the neoindigenous.

Works Cited

Emdin, Christopher. *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood - and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*. Beacon Press, 2017.