# Webinar Transcript for “Antiracism in Asynchronous Writing Consultations” with Eric Camarillo

## Webinar Housekeeping

**[Sarah Prince, facilitator]:** Start Recording. We can go ahead and get started. Hi, everyone, welcome to today's webinar. Today's webinar is hosted by the Online Writing Centers Association. I am Sarah, and I'm the moderator for today's presentation. Facilitating along with me today are Elle, and she's going to field questions in the chat box, and she'll also be leading our guided discussion with our presenter today, and Jenelle, who is behind the scenes addressing today's technology. Next slide.

Eric Camarillo is joining us today to present his session titled “Enacting Antiracism in Asynchronous Writing Consultations.” We're really excited about this session, and we're really thrilled to have Eric with us today. So a little bit about Eric before I turn it over to him. Eric is currently a doctoral student at Texas Tech University, and he has over 11 years of experience working in higher education spaces. His experience is focused on academic support resources, including writing centers, the composition classroom, student success centers, and learning commons. And, that experience also spans a variety of institutional types, including predominantly white institutions, Hispanic Serving Institutions, four-year universities, and two-year colleges.

He currently serves as the Director of the Learning Commons at Harrisburg Area Community College, where he oversees testing, the library, user support, and tutoring services for over 19,000 students. His research agenda is currently focused on writing centers and best practices within these spaces. He pays particular attention to asynchronous and synchronous online modalities. Eric has published in *The Peer Review*, *Praxis*, and the *Journal of Academic Support Programs*. He has also presented his research at numerous conferences, including IWCA [International Writing Centers Association], the South Central Writing Center Association, and the Mid Atlantic Writing Center Association. Finally, he will serve as a co-chair for the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing’s 2021 conference. As I said, we are thrilled to have Eric presenting today.

But before we begin, I want to go over a couple of housekeeping issues. Our schedule today will begin with Eric presenting for about 30 to 35 minutes, and then we are going to give everyone a 10-minute wiggle break, as my son's first-grade teacher likes to call it. [laughs] And then when we come back from that break, we will leave the rest of the time today for discussion, based on your questions that you asked in the chat box. So, next slide.

And just to go over participation really quickly before we get started. I want to note a few guidelines. Please note that this webinar is being recorded, and it will be posted on the OWCA [Online Writing Center Association] website. We have ASL [American Sign Language] interpreters in this session. So please let us know in the chat if you cannot see or find the interpreters at any time. Your audio and video were automatically turned off when you entered the webinar today. We will keep these turned off during the presentation to reduce visual and auditory distractions to our presenters and other attendees. And, lastly, you're welcome to post comments and questions in the chat. Elle is planning on compiling your questions for Eric to answer in the guided Q&A portion of today's presentation. So we really encourage those questions. Again, because we have so many participants today--which is super exciting--we do want to streamline and make sure that everyone's able to kind of ask those questions equitably, so there won't be any unmuting to ask questions allowed. Please, though, type those questions in the chat. Eric has graciously agreed to answer your questions that we don't get to today via email later. So we'll send those questions to Eric after today's presentation, and then we'll post his responses as soon as possible. Okay. Next slide.

So just a quick primer, since we are going to be using chat as our primary means of communication. To use the chat in Zoom, you’ll want to hover over the bottom of the Zoom screen and click on the “Chat” icon. You'll see it pointed to there with the pink arrow on the screen. The Chat panel should appear on the right side of your screen. Okay, so that-- And I see a lot of you already using the chat, so I feel like you're probably old pros at this point.

So with all of those housekeeping issues out of the way, I'm going to turn it over to Eric for today's presentation.

## Introduction to Presentation

**[Eric Camarillo]:** Hi, everybody. Thank you so much for being here and joining me. Let me see if I can get to the next-- Here we go-- to the next slide.

So thank you so much for attending today's webinar with me. I apologize: there is a little bit of yard work going on outside of my window. So if there is a little bit of roaring, just bear with me. I will try and speak up. Sarah, thank you so much for the introduction. My name is Eric Camarillo, and I'll be talking today about antiracism in asynchronous writing center consultations, specifically about potential strategies of enactments and potential features of this kind of feedback.

Before I begin, though, I do want to acknowledge that for me, this is all still an ongoing learning process. I am by no means an expert on antiracism or maybe even writing centers, but I am curious, and I am constantly focused on how to make writing centers stronger. I also want to contend that I know my webcam is up here, and I know best practice is for me to look directly at it. I find that a little off putting, so I'm going to be looking at a couple of different places. So just bear with me while I do that as well. My last note before I begin is about my positionality here. So the findings I present here are based on a study I conducted while at the University of Houston-Victoria [UHV], where I oversaw a writing center directly.

I am now at a different institution where I'm a couple of layers removed from the writing center, but I'll discuss at the end some of my future plans for continuing this research. I only provide this note to clarify that at certain points I may go back and forth between talking about UHV [University of Houston-Victoria] and talking about my current institution, Harrisburg Area Community College.

## Outline

**[Eric]:** So part of my discussion today is about the current context surrounding asynchronous writing center consultations and online writing center practices more broadly. I want to spend some time talking about how we got here and the importance of researching our practices online. Next, I'll define the terms “asynchronous” and “antiracism” briefly. Most folks indicated that they had some familiarity with these terms, but I would like to set them up for how I'll be using them in this presentation anyway.

The bulk of the presentation will center on a study I conducted in the Summer of 2020 on documents submitted to the University of Houston-Victoria’s Writing Center near the end of Spring 2020, when most institutions had pivoted to remote or online learning. The study was IRB approved but small, and I'll talk through my data collection methods as well as some of my results. Finally, I’ll discuss some areas for future research and posit ongoing questions.

## Context: A Need for More Research and Pandemic-Related Concerns

**[Eric]:** So Context: A Need for More Research and Pandemic-Related Concerns. We know a lot about writing center practices in the face-to-face consultation. We have a strong idea of what best practices exist thanks to scholars like North, Lunsford, and Brooks. From each scholar, we get the ideas like Socratic questioning, collaborative learning, and minimalist tutoring. The field also continues to grapple with antiracism and oppressive linguistic practices that constitute or are constituted by writing center practices.

Scholars such as Grimm, Bawarshi and Pelkowski, Greenfield, and Garcia, and many others have all worked to highlight the potential ways in which writing centers work to exclude or oppress the students we serve, particularly students who come from a non-standard linguistic background with a special focus on students of color. Much of what I've learned and studied about writing centers can also translate into synchronous online sessions with the caveat that technology is more directly mediating this experience. However, more could be done to understand exactly how different platforms, computers, and other technology concerns affect the synchronous online experience.

There's also a body of work studying online writing instruction, a cousin to online writing center practice. Authors such as Bergman and McArdle, with their PARS [personal, accessible, responsible strategic] approach, Hewett, who I discuss more in depth later, and Warnock have all worked to refine approaches to writing instruction in synchronous and asynchronous classroom settings.

Finally, I'd be remiss without mentioning antiracist writing instruction efforts put forth by scholars, such as Asao Inoue and his *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* and *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*. Such efforts have enriched our understanding of grading practices and how to build more equitable assessments for our students.

Yet, for all the efforts put forth in writing studies broadly to better understand best practices in synchronous writing center sessions and in various modalities and composition, we know very little about asynchronous sessions in writing centers. In “Beyond the Lore: A Case for Asynchronous Online Tutoring Research,” Denton posits that “a format that could have represented an innovation has instead been largely relegated to the sidelines of the field.” Denton makes the case that we must certainly research asynchronous sessions to enrich the field of writing centers and to break away from the lore that undergirds so much of what we know about writing centers.

This particular article is what really helped me better understand how little we actually know about how asynchronous sessions work. And in a time when so many of us are still doing our work fully online or in some hybrid way, it's imperative that we better understand how we're serving students and how we might serve them better.

I’ve listed here all the things we don't yet have a full grasp of about asynchronous writing center consultations. We're not sure

* what best practices there are
* what strategies work best for online writing center practice
* the methods by which consultants leave comments
* the kind or nature of the comments that work best for different students
* the theories or frameworks that might increase the efficacy of asynchronous sessions
* and the limitations that bound asynchronous practice

Now, I'm not saying no one knows this. I'm sure each of us at our institutions have devised strategies and techniques for training consultants or perhaps we've done our own textual analysis when giving feedback to tutors. What I am saying is that the items in this list are not always shared out. In part, asynchronous writing consultations have been pushed to the side because they're often compared against the face-to-face consultation. That is, asynchronous sessions are typically situated as an alternative to the preferred face-to-face sessions or held to the same standards as the face-to-face session despite asynchronous tutoring being an entirely different paradigm. Or, when we do write about asynchronous sessions or conferences, it might also be in the context of instruction, which for me has very different purposes and exigencies than asynchronous sessions in the writing center. That is, there's a different power dynamic in the feedback an instructor gives versus the feedback a tutor might give. So even if a strategy works well for asynchronous writing instructors, that doesn't mean the strategy will work equally well for writing consultants. It might, but my point is, we don't know.

So what I hope I've done here is mirror Denton’s call for more research on this branch of writing center studies, both because we're in a pandemic that demands our work be done at a distance and because the field of writing centers will be better for it.

In part, the goal of this presentation is to reframe the value of asynchronous writing center work and to demonstrate why it should be seen as an innovation rather than a disruption, a valid option for students, rather than a subpar alternative. In particular, this presentation also aims to help writing center practitioners frame online asynchronous appointments as an antiracist tool within their centers. Something I hope to show, and I hope you think so too, is that asynchronous work is not just editing a paper. There’s a lot of promise and potential and labor in this practice, and if we can learn to re-see that promise and potential and labor, we can enhance writing center studies. Finally, maybe most importantly, one of my goals is to generate conversation around asynchronous practices.

## Definitions

**[Eric]:** So before continuing on, I would like to make sure that we’re all on the same page when it comes to asynchronous and antiracism. The latter, specifically, I’m using in a particular way.

### Asynchronous

**[Eric]:** I’ve taken from Hewett’s *The Online Writing Conference* not necessarily what an asynchronous session is, but how one typically works. Let me walk you through how I might modify each of these items, though.

#### 1. A writer emails or electronically posts an essay to an online instructor.

So since I'm focusing on writing centers and not online writing instruction, I would change the first one to “email a document to a writing center,” to either an email address or submit it through some online portal such as TutorTrac, the WCOnline, or Upswing.

#### 2. The instructor reads the essay and provides feedback and instruction.

The second would be, “The consultant reads the document and provides feedback,” which may be more directive and I’ll talk about that later. An important modification for writing centers is to expand “essay” here into “document.” Depending on the nature of your writing center, you may be helping students with a variety of writing assignments, not just the essay.

#### 3. The writer reads or listens to the instructor’s response and revises the essay (or not).

In the third point, we can replace “instructor” with “writing consultant” or “tutor” or “coach” or whatever you might call them. But the rest can remain the same. I know spoken feedback has become quite popular with online writing instructors, and I find the idea intriguing for writing centers, if logistically challenging. But something important to note is the “or not” in parentheses here. I’ll go into a little more detail later in the presentation, but this “or not” is a big part, I think, of how asynchronous sessions function and how they can empower students.

#### 4. The writer desires further feedback and submits new essay draft.

The last point for writing centers is an ideal, but I do think repeat visits work well for both students who are face-to-face and those who are online.

### Antiracism

**[Eric]:** For antiracism, I turn to Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist*. I want to take a couple of seconds to read through this with you: “An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and *unwritten* laws, rules, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people” (18). Emphasis there is added. For Kendi, racism and antiracism necessarily function structurally, so antiracism isn’t just something people can do on a personal basis (although it can be): it’s something we have to actively work to create. In large part, we work to create antiracist policies by identifying and removing racist ones.

To extend this idea, then, weaving antiracism into asynchronous sessions also means closely examining the comments and feedback we leave, how we leave them, and why we leave them. We, and our tutors, must be increasingly cognizant of how what we write can potentially enact racist or antiracist effects. While beyond the scope of this presentation, I’ll discuss the importance of something like training near the end.

## Analysis

### Method and Methodology

**[Eric]:** So let me give a brief overview of my study. While I am planning a larger analysis that incorporates activity theory, this one was much smaller and completed in the Summer of 2020. I collected 5 long reports from a professional writing class (or a job writing class), examining only the comments that were left on the documents. So not the documents themselves, just the comments. From there, I coded comments with an open coding scheme, beginning with 2 general ones (local and global) and then expanding to about 8 different categories. However, after receiving some feedback for a journal article under review about this study, I eventually narrowed these categories down to 3, and I’ll discuss those in a moment.

My original study conducted at UHV [University of Houston-Victoria] was only focused on features of the comments themselves, and it was only later that I attempted to analyze them through an antiracist lens. To help me create a framework, I turned to Suhr-Sytsma and Brown’s “Theory In/To Practice: Addressing the Everyday Language of Oppression in the Writing Center.”

### Suhr-Sytsma and Brown

[included on slide] How tutors and writers can challenge oppression through attention to language:

1. Clarify meanings together
2. Express understanding of one another’s meanings
3. Discuss meaning and use of sources
4. Pose counterarguments
5. Maintain a non-combative tone
6. Address language without accusations of intentional oppression
7. Name the “elephant in the room”
8. Learn to better identify and address language that perpetuates oppression

**[Eric]:** I’ll give you just a moment to scan through this, but I’ll keep talking. Please read through each of the items. While Suhr-Sytsma and Brown present two lists in their work, one for how language can perpetuate oppression and one for how oppression can be challenged through attention to language, only the latter will be used here. And this is the one that I have on the screen for you.

Additionally, I should note that Suhr-Sytsma and Brown seem to be writing from a traditional face-to-face perspective and are more concerned about linguistic oppression as it emerges in student writing, not just within the work of consultants. So my focus is also a bit different here.

The lists were developed through--

**[Jenelle, facilitator]:** Eric, sorry. Sorry to interrupt you. The interpreters asked if you could slow down a bit in your pace.

**[Eric]:** I can. I apologize.

**[Jenelle, facilitator]:** Thank you.

**[Eric]:** The lists were developed through focus group studies and collaboration with peer writing consultants, anti-hierarchical methods that allow for the cultivation of an antiracist heuristic, although the authors don’t necessarily characterize this list as antiracist. Rather than persuading the writing consultants to assimilate to a process of the authors’ own creation, the consultants themselves become part of the research process. Suhr-Sytsma and Brown even frame the culture of their writing center as anti-hierarchical: “…our center encourages tutors to see themselves as peers to the writers they tutor. Our staff strives to learn from the writers they tutor and also seek tutoring themselves” (20). This lack of an enforced hierarchy allows for the cultivation of antiracist tools as well as learning by avoiding, as Kendi notes, “the dueling White consciousness” (31) of either assimilation or segregation, both of which depend on behavioral and cultural hierarchy.

However, I didn't use all the items in my analysis. Again like so much of writing center scholarship, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown focus on the face-to-face consultation. However, in future research, it may be worthwhile to create an asynchronous heuristic based on this list.

Suhr-Sytsma and Brown are careful to note that their heuristic is “locally bound” (14). They also contend, “the lists might prompt tutors at other institutions to follow the process we will describe to make their own lists from scratch” (15). While such a list is beyond the scope of this presentation, the lists that Suhr-Sytsma and Brown present can be valuable, not just to other institutions, but also other modalities of tutoring. While Suhr-Sytsma and Brown present 8 distinct items in their list, “How Tutors and Writers Can Challenge Oppression through Attention to Language,” I will present only the items that seemed to manifest most clearly in my analysis of consultant comments at UHV [University of Houston-Victoria]. These items are the following, and I put them on the screen here for you:

1. Clarify meanings together
2. Expressing understanding of one another’s meanings
3. Discuss meaning and use of sources (22)

#### Clarify Meanings Together

**[Eric]:** In their discussion of clarifying meanings together, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown say, “[writing consultants] often ask fellow tutors and writers to clarify their meanings when they sense oppressive language at play” (35). Consultants at UHV [University of Houston-Victoria] used similar strategies, typically framed as word choice or clarity questions. For instance, one consultant wrote, “Is this the word you meant to use?” While another asked, “It is unclear what you are referring to when you say ‘these,’ so make sure to define what you are talking about.”

However, one element missing from the asynchronous paradigm in Suhr-Sytsma and Brown’s heuristic is “together.” Since the student and the consultant are not working in real time, asynchronous sessions could be viewed as lacking the immediacy of item 1. However, I revisit this potential lacking as a strength later, while also potentially redefining what “together” means in an asynchronous context.

#### Expressing Understanding of One Another’s Meanings

**[Eric]:** Of their second point, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown write, “Our center encourages tutors to see themselves as readers, a test audience for writers” (35), so writing consultants will share their interpretation as readers with the students. This has also long been a practice at UHV’s [University of Houston-Victoria’s] writing center, with writing consultants asked to reframe their comments with the phrase “as a reader,” especially when working with students on clarity or style.

More than this, though, consultants also remind students that they are writing for an audience. For instance, one consultant in this study asked, “Does your reader know what this acronym stands for?” It’s a small question referencing an acronym that was not preceded by the full name of an organization, but it reminds the student to take the needs of their various audiences into account when drafting and revising a paper.

Additionally, responding as a reader can also mean asking for more information. One consultant in this study wrote, “This is a good point, but I think you can elaborate more on it. For example, maybe you can talk about the specific negative thoughts the elderly may have.” Being a reader doesn’t just mean being critical: it also means being curious and asking for more if more seems appropriate for the particular situation.

#### Discuss Meaning and Use of Sources

**[Eric]:** While Suhr-Sytsma and Brown’s third point refers to outside sources, I think it can also apply to understanding assignment prompts, especially when discussing meaning. They write, “…tutors generally ask writers to ‘step back’ and orally describe the content of their sources” (36). In my analysis of comments, one consultant wrote, “Check the assignment directions. Do you need a table of contents and letter of transmittal?” I typically see this kind of comment when the consultant has either taken the class the paper is for or has worked with a paper like it previously. That is, the consultant already knows the expectations of the assignment, or even of the professor, and senses that the student may not be addressing all the items that need to be addressed. It’s a prompt to remind the student to double check the instructions, to take a step back from them, or to reach out to the professor and ask for clarification.

However, in Suhr-Sytsma and Brown’s case, there is an immediate effect to prompting writers to double check sources or even assignment prompts. For the asynchronous model, we only know if a writer double checked a source or instructions if we see visible changes in the next draft, which is not always guaranteed.

I'm going to skip this next slide and jump on into findings.

### Findings

**[Eric]:** So these first two points I'll discuss together.

While asynchronous sessions may lack the immediacy of Suhr-Systma and Browns’ “clarifying meanings” point, I argue that asynchronous sessions, by more evenly distributing power, demonstrate both antiracism and resistance to everyday language oppression. Kendi argues, “…race is fundamentally a power construct of blended difference that lives socially. Race creates new forms of power: the power to categorize and judge, elevate and downgrade, include and exclude” (37). This power extends to the writing center consultation.

For instance, in a traditional session, as the consultant asks questions or provides feedback, they’re also directing the student’s attention, bringing up issues that perhaps hadn’t occurred to the student before, but that the consultant believes to be important. I would argue that there’s a pressure in the face-to-face consultation for the student to respond immediately and that there’s power in being able to direct someone’s attention in this way. If a consultant asks the student what the main idea of their paper is or what they’re trying to get across in a certain paragraph, the student feels pressured to answer that question then and there. In an asynchronous session, though, the student can actively choose to come back to certain questions later or even ignore them, which shifts the power dynamics of a face-to-face session and provides the student a greater potential for agency. The “or not” of Hewett resonates loudest for me here.

Third, I argue it’s easier for consultants to take the position of a reader in asynchronous sessions than in a face-to-face setting. As much as there’s pressure for the student in a face-to-face consultation, there’s equal pressure for the consultant to say something immediately helpful and clarifying to the student—but whatever is said can’t be taken back. As a reader, a consultant can digest and think through what’s working and what’s not without an audience present and can revise and edit their comments as needed until returning feedback to the student. The asynchronous format creates more space for consultants to be attentive to their language, to identify points where they may be potentially using the everyday language of oppression or perpetuating racist ideologies unintentionally. The “unintentionally” is important to note there because if you have a consultant who is intentionally perpetuating racist ideologies, you have a different set of problems.

Finally, comments were generally more directive than they might’ve been in a face-to-face consultation. This occurs, I think, in order to avoid potential confusion. Asking a question about an item is not necessarily a signal to the student that something isn’t working. If I ask a student, “Do you really think X should be here?” Well, a student can say “Yes” to themselves and not make any changes. The fact that they’re not making changes isn’t necessarily the problem as much as not understanding what is or isn’t working in their paper. So why they are or are not making changes. To avoid this situation, UHV [University of Houston-Victoria] consultants were typically asked to provide more directive commentary and to pair it with an explanation: “Do X because Y.” This helps to create actionable comments, signaling to the student that something should be done at a particular point in the paper and how the paper will benefit. This one isn’t necessarily tied to antiracist practices, but it is a feature that I found.

## Conclusion: Some Final Thoughts

**[Eric]:** So some ending thoughts and conclusions and ponderings.

As usual, I’m left with more questions than answers, but I find questions often to be generative, and I hope you do too. It was not my intent to be the final say on antiracism in asynchronous consultations. I don’t know if anyone really can be. But I would like to share some questions and ideas about how we might move forward as a field.

So I’ll begin with a counter idea: maybe there’s no such thing as an antiracist comment. Maybe no single comment can actually be antiracist. Maybe it’s all the feedback taken together that can function as antiracist. Comments on grammar, for instance, can function in a racist, oppressive way if used to restrict or constrict the ideas of the author, if used to sterilize the intent of the original idea, if mistaken for writing “properly.” But this doesn’t mean that every comment about grammar is racist. If a student wants to learn more about commas, am I morally compromised if I provide this information? If I model sentences? Or is the act of addressing this student’s concerns, rather than concentrating on my own, itself an antiracist act?

What produces equity in an asynchronous consultation? Can a single comment do this? Should every single comment in an asynchronous consultation do this? How do we write comments in an actively antiracist way?

Do we need to be attuned to how we leave comments? Is it kind of a mindset? Will this result automatically in an antiracist comment if I adopt an antiracist mindset? Or are there specific features of antiracist comments that we can readily, confidently replicate from one session to the next?

Does the work of antiracism begin outside the consultation? If we’re focused on policies, as Kendi would have us do, should we concentrate on the policies and procedures that inform our work in the first place? What are the effects of those policies? Who do they help? Who do they harm? And if we create antiracist policies in our centers, how do we enact these policies in individual sessions? In different modalities? Asynchronously?

Which leads me of course to my ongoing question: How do we enact antiracism in asynchronous writing center consultations? I posit that it begins with the policies that we craft that influence how we train tutors and the types of mindsets we cultivate within them. And what? Hopefully, those mindsets lead to antiracist actions. Is this where mindfulness can come in? Maybe a mindfulness of difference, an embracing of it, as Garcia exhorts us to do.

To what extent are antiracism and decolonization, then, linked? What other theories can be incorporated into the asynchronous format? Can activity theory help us understand why tutors leave comments and how they do so? Can decolonialism help us re-imagine what these comments look like? What other theories can work?

Can what Suhr-Sytsma and Brown do to resist oppressive language practice be translated into an asynchronous format when tutors leave comments? Yes I think so. Because tutors won’t have to remember and implement the heuristic in the moment. They can refer back to it and enact it intentionally. Or, as Suhr-Sytsma and Brown argue, “Tutors can indeed address structural oppression by carefully attending to the actual words of individuals in their writing centers” (18). Asynchronous sessions, to me, seem the ideal vehicle for this kind of careful attendance.

## Recommended Texts

**[Eric]:** That is the formal end of my presentation. I do have a couple of recommended texts. I'll leave them up during the break. If you’d like me to refer back to them, I can. It's not a full literature review. I know a lot of people mentioned having expertise or knowledge of antiracism and these kinds of practices.

* But certainly I refer much to Greenfield and “The Standard English Fairy Tale.”
* I draw a lot from Garcia and his “Unmaking Gringo Centers.” I reference him actually in that last section about decolonization.
* Of course Hewett, *The Online Writing Center Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors*.
* And Denton, “Beyond the Lore: A Case for Asynchronous Tutoring Research,” which kind of sparked this initial research trajectory.
* And finally, of course, I recommend Suhr-Sytsma and Brown, “Theory In/To Practice.” If you haven't read it already, I do think it has a lot of potential for different modalities, as well as different centers.

Thank you very much. That's the end of my presentation. My name is Eric Camarillo. I will leave it up on here. I don't know, Sarah, do you want to--

**[Sarah, facilitator]:** It’s A-okay for you to leave that slide up, yes. Thank you so much, Eric. And as I said before, I've got 32 past the hour. So we'll come back and reconvene at let's say 3:43 Eastern Standard Time and 2:43-- this is easy math, but it's really difficult for me--2:43 Central Standard Time to talk “Antiracism in Asynchronous Writing Consultations” with Eric. So everyone feel free to get another cup of coffee. Take a lap around your house. And we will reconvene at 43 past the hour.

Also during the break--I failed to mention this--but if you would like to post your questions in the chat box--I see a couple of those rolling in now--feel free. Elle, Jenelle, and I are going to try to organize those, so we'll have those ready for Eric when we start back up. So thanks, take a break, we'll see you soon.

## Discussion

**[Sarah, facilitator, returning from break]:** I have 43 past the hour. So let's go ahead and get started. Jenelle, just a reminder, I think you started the recording. But just to verify we're recording.

So again, as a reminder, we are not unmuting and asking questions to sort of streamline all the questions that have come in during the break and the follow-up questions that you might have based on Eric's responses today. However, if you don't get your questions answered, we are going to send these to Eric and we'll post his responses--no pressure, Eric--on OWCA’s website after the fact. So I'm going to go ahead and turn it over to Elle and, Eric, Elle is going to sort of be guiding the questions and answers during this portion. So, Elle, I will turn it over to you.

[**Elle, facilitator]:** Alright. Thank you, Sarah. Yeah, we've had some really good questions coming in. So I will just read them out as Sarah said. We won't be able to get to all of them because there's a lot of them. So Eric will answer them after the fact.

So the first question I'm going to pass along, Eric, is, “Can you explain what you mean with a little more detail about how correcting grammar can be racist?”

**[Eric]:** Sure. So we used to do-- I used to have consultants who would make comments frequently on students’ papers about “This is too informal for these kinds of assignments.” And often that informality was related to sometimes word choice, sometimes diction, sometimes tone.

I know grammar-- When we think of grammar, we often think of just punctuation but grammar extends to the whole meaning-making process. And so what I mean, and what I find problematic about that kind of comment-- So I'm just using that as an example. This kind of idea that a certain kind of language is informal whereas another one is automatically formal or more appropriate or that certain languages may be inappropriate for this kind of context [can] be somewhat constricting, without necessarily taking into account say the intent of the paper or the point of it, right? So if you're always assuming people are writing formal essays and at UHV [University of Houston-Victoria], they weren't always. Sometimes they were literacy narratives or other types of personal essay assignments where students had a bit more flexibility in terms of how they conducted those assignments. So flexibility in terms of grammar and diction and word choice and things like that. And so we want it to be-- So I’m thinking of that as a particular example. But we want to be mindful about how we present grammar, how we present even certain rules of punctuation.

So if you have a student who say are trying to write in Black Vernacular English and you're like correcting it to academic discourse, perhaps that's not what the student is trying to do right so you want to take intention and what the student is planning into account. So when I say something like “teaching grammar can potentially be racist,” that's kind of what I mean. I don't think it is all the time. I think that if someone is trying to learn more about commas or semicolons or they're trying to find just that right word for this particular sentence, those to me seem like helpful practices, and you want to help students navigate these kind of structures.

**[Elle, facilitator]:** Alright, thank you. So the next question is, “Some consultants and instructors might believe antiracist asynchronous tutoring is important only when working with students of color. As a result, Consultants at PWIs [Primarily White Institutions] and institutions in predominantly white states might believe antiracism is something you do a very small percentage of the time. So how might we work against that perception?”

**[Eric]:** So I think first, I think many of us are coming from nonstandard discourses. It's very-- I don't think anyone really speaks academically in their day-to-day lives, right? So even if you're at a PWI [Primarily White Institution] and something like 90% of your students are white or white-identified, they're still coming from different kinds of discourses, especially if they're coming from, say, rural areas or they're coming from maybe a lower socioeconomic background. So we're all kind of coming from these nonstandard discourses.

What's important-- And I think maybe I can draw on-- [sighs] I forgot her name, but she I think taught at SUNY in the early 70s or 80s. But she draws this metaphor and she's very well known. I'm totally blanking on her name. This book is also really well known. I apologize. I'm sure many of you are maybe commenting on it right now, but she treats students or she kind of draws this correlation between new students entering the academy as people from, say, one country entering another country. And I think maybe in her case it was due mostly to open enrollment or the start of open enrollments. And so what you see there are people from different types of-- in her context, you know, they're coming from different racial enclaves. But I think that metaphor makes sense to people who don't have any kind of connection to college. So if you're a first generation student, it actually doesn't really matter what your-- I don't want to say, “It doesn't matter what your race is.” But if you're at a PWI [Primarily White Institution] and you are white, but your parents didn't go to college, your grandparents didn't go to college, your experience with college is going to be very different. And I think it's always prudent to be mindful of how we're correcting students, no matter what kind of discourse they're coming from. So when it comes to maybe trying to generate that buy-in from students or tutors or instructors at a PWI [Primarily White Institution], maybe framing it in that context that there are other ways of being nonstandard that don't necessarily have anything to do with race, but that do have maybe something to do with how students are coming to your institution.

**[Elle, facilitator]:** Okay, thank you. So we had a couple suggestions in the chat. Maybe Shaughnessy?

**[Eric]:** That’s it!

**[Elle, facilitator]:** Shaughnessy? Okay.

**[Eric]:** Shaughnessy. Thank you so much. [laughs] I totally blanked. I’m like “something with an S.” [laughs]

**[Elle, facilitator]:** It happens. So our next question is, “Are there any specific things you've seen in asynchronous appointments that you'd suggest tutors definitely should not do?”

**[Eric]:** Yeah, so I know there are a couple of UHV [University of Houston-Victoria] tutors in this webinar. And I know they can't unmute, but they could definitely tell you what my suggestions always were or what my strong recommendations to avoid were. So generally speaking, I really don't recommend Track Changes. I really don't think writing within the student’s paper asynchronously is helpful. I strongly prefer having all the comments in the margins. Word makes that pretty easy. So I think that it just makes the paper a little bit cleaner when it comes to the students.

I also would recommend not straight editing the paper, even if you think that you're being helpful, even if it's like maybe a final draft. And maybe it depends on the context and how many times you've worked with the student, but really a lot of comments or a lot of straight editing can be really overwhelming to the students. So you want to make sure that-- so I'm leading this back to frequency of comments, which is one of Hewett's notes. You know, you don't want to leave 50 comments on a single page, and they're all about commas. Or something like that. It's not really a productive use of, I think, tutor time. It also, I think, creates unnecessary anxiety for the students. So I think being judicious about what you choose to comment on. And one thing from Hewett that I think may be helpful here too is from the very beginning, choosing what you want to focus on. Do you think that you should focus on lower-order concerns, so sentence structure, grammar, things like that, or would you like to focus more on the higher-order concerns, thesis, organization, flow, topics, and things like that? And once you make that choice, trying to stick with it, depending on the needs of the student in the moment, based on what you're kind of reading in the paper,

But I would definitely watch out for writing in the document itself. So trying to avoid that as much as possible. So making as minimal changes there as you can. And then watching out for leaving too many comments, right? I really think that can just totally overload a student. They won't know what to do with them, especially if they are a novice writer, which is probably the type of student who would get a lot of comments or that tutors would want to leave a lot of comments for.

**[Elle, facilitator]:** Thank you, those are some great suggestions for what to avoid in asynchronous tutoring.

Our next question is about the tutors that you studied and whether or not they had previous experience with asynchronous tutoring or if you were starting it as a response to the pandemic. And then how sustainable do you think continuing with asynchronous tutoring will be after kind of hopefully at some point the pandemic ends?

**[Eric]:** Yeah, so the University of Houston Victoria is-- I'm going to contrast here with Harrisburg Area Community College. So the University of Houston Victoria is somewhat unique in that it has a pretty robust online suite of programs. So there are a number of programs that are purely online, and as a result of that, many of the academic support programs also have purely online arms. And so when I came on board there in 2013, they'd been doing asynchronous online sessions since the 90s. So they had a pretty strong sense of how to do it. And I modified it here and there as I kind of came into my role. But the way that we actually handled the pandemic was relatively simple because we had already this infrastructure for serving online students and serving students remotely. So we were able to very easily pivot to offering everything online rather than face to face. So I guess you could also say that UHV [University of Houston-Victoria] is something of a hybrid model. Their asynchronous tutoring platform or portal is quite popular. It's probably very busy. You're looking at-- For an institution with about 4,000 students, you're looking at maybe 1,000 documents just coming through that portal, and so it becomes a great deal of that traffic that we see in the writing center.

So compare this against say-- So they all have-- So to answer the question, they all had experience with doing asynchronous sessions, actually as part of their training. So they go through, I think a two-week period with me, where we talked about theories then we talked about research, things like that. And then the last 2 weeks of their training are them doing mock documents where they're working with previous papers from previous semesters. They're leaving comments. I'm giving feedback about the comments that they leave about how to do them in an effective way. And so they all have experience and training with that.

When it comes to life after the pandemic, whatever that looks like, I do think that now that so many institutions have gone through the effort of creating this infrastructure, whether that's synchronous online or whether it's asynchronous, now that they’ve found the platforms that they're using, whether it's Zoom or some kind of all-in-one product, the WCOnline, Upswing or TutorTrac, I think that these modalities will always be a part of what we offer. I think that there will always be a set of students who will always be interested in receiving academic support in this way.

And so I'm at Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) now, where they really weren't doing a whole lot of asynchronous or online tutoring before. So they made that pivot very quickly and I think very well. But now we're in the situation where we're trying to expand. We call it HOWL, the HACC Online Writing Lab. And so I'm drawing on a lot of my experience from UHV [University of Houston-Victoria] to help us implement this process, but I do think that there will always be students who want support in this way.

**[Elle, facilitator]:** Excellent. So we've had a couple of questions about, “When the actual content that the student has written is racist, how a tutor should kind of approach that?”

**[Eric]:** Sure. I think for that you can draw directly from Suhr-Sytsma and Brown because that's really what they're writing about. I mean they were writing about the oppression that occurs in everyday language use, so maybe not students doing it intentionally, but students who were maybe doing it unintentionally where they're not questioning sources, they're using stereotypes as facts, you know things like that. And so how do you combat that? And one of their strategies is just to name the elephant in the room. So if it's an issue about race, you should talk about race. It's okay to engage in that conversation, especially if the paper is about that, right? If you're trying to write a paper about James Baldwin, but you're not trying to talk about him being African American, you're going to have a hard time, depending on the nature of your paper I suppose. But really, if you're trying to avoid those conversations, you're not really helping the students.

So I'm kind of coming at this question as if the student is doing it unintentionally, which maybe I hope is the case. I know many students kind of stumbled into conversations about race, especially if they're young, if they're coming from more homogenous backgrounds, they just don't know. So I'm coming from that kind of angle where we want to try and generate those conversations. Asynchronously, it may just be kinds of different questions, asking about, “where did you hear this from?” “Can you provide a source about this information?” Or approaching it as the reader: “Your reader may benefit from wherever you receive this information from, about whatever racial group you're generalizing about.” So approaching it directly and not trying to avoid it or glide over it and just trying to bring awareness to it, especially for the student who maybe just doesn't know that what they've said is potentially offensive or racist or sexist or any of the other “-ists” that can occur in writing.

For a student who is intentionally presenting racist ideas, I think you have a different kind of problem. I don't know that-- The consultant, depending on their comfort level, can work to address the issue and kind of again asking those questions, framing it as if it's coming from a reader, talking about sources, trying to unravel the idea. But if you have a student who's really kind of staunch and they're very stuck on this idea, that may be where you want to begin conversations with the instructor or the professor just to kind of begin those conversations. It takes a village to work with students and to make sure that students are growing in the ways that are effective and productive for them.

**[Elle, facilitator]:** Thank you. Our next question is about, “Do you have any suggestions for validating Englishes other than standard while teaching the standard form and getting them to be taken seriously in academia? And do you have any suggestions for partnering with other programs on campus to expand views on language and encourage embracing difference and not uniformity in student writing?”

**[Eric]:** Yeah, I think here, what we really see is what I call sort of like the border of the writing center. I think really what we see here is some of the limitations about what we can actually do within our contexts. When it comes to trying to evaluate different kinds of Englishes, I really think that work has to occur within programs like writing across the curriculum, it should be occurring in composition, and it can occur in partnership with the writing center. But I think it's very difficult for the writing center to do that kind of work by itself without buy-in from the other English in parts of the institution, the writing studies parts of it. So when it comes to trying to form those partnerships, I think it begins with if not deans then maybe chairs, trying to get chair buy-in, talking directly to English faculty, presenting this vision of what valuing pluriversality means so valuing other voices, valuing other kinds of writing.

One thing we began to do at HACC [Harrisburg Area Community College] is offering tutoring in actual different languages. So not different Englishes but actual different languages. And I think some of them are in-- some of them are not writing. Some of them are math or science or nursing, but certainly I think being able to-- that there is a movement to begin offering writing help in different languages, right? For students who are coming from maybe ESL [English as a Second Language] backgrounds, rather than just different Englishes. I know I'm kind of merging a bunch of different topics together here, and I don't mean to do that. But for me, all these ideas run together, and they all kind of touch on one another.

But I do think for partnering with other units, it begins with those meetings, right? It begins with those collaborations and figuring out how can we at this institution, either online, or when we eventually return face to face, how can we do things like events? Can we do contests? Can we do-- I think Grimm and Barron talk about like a poetry night or like a different kind of diversity like “Writer Night” or something like that they have in one of their articles. I'm oversimplifying here, which I don't mean to do but-- Different ways of trying to spotlight authors from different backgrounds or different consultants from different backgrounds.

But it also doesn't hurt, too, thinking about consultants. If you're trying to value different Englishes, to draw on the consultants themselves who come from those Englishes and those types of backgrounds. When I first began at UHV, we were almost a 100% white writing center. And as we transition from serving just upper division and graduate students just to serving-- as we downward expanded to include sophomores and freshmen, I also began to diversify the writing center actively, so looking for and drawing on students who were doing well in their English classes, but coming from different kinds of backgrounds. And what that results in is students who are maybe bilingual working with-- UHV [University of Houston-Victoria] is an HSI [Hispanic Serving Institution], so drawing on students who are bilingual or from these cultural backgrounds. I think it can also be really powerful. And it's something that writing centers can control within the borders of their centers.

**[Elle, facilitator]** Excellent. We have a question, “Can you elaborate on how activity theory and decolonialism can help consultants enact antiracism in the asynchronous context?”

**[Eric]** My short answer is not yet. [laughs] I think that activity theory-- so activity theory for me is very-- I discovered it-- not discovered it-- I read about it, I guess, maybe about a year ago, so Fall 2019. And it struck me as I actually-- you're thinking about Ben Horne's dissertation, where he links-- he does an activity theoretical analysis of writing center practices. Again he's thinking face-to-face though, so not all of it can translate to the asynchronous format, but activity theory for me helps to unlock why tutors leave comments on certain things and not others and how they leave comments in the first place. For me, trying to uncover that kind of a link is, I think, really important.

So thinking about-- Activity theory for me is helpful because it helps me to think about activity systems, right? So the activity systems in which consultants exist, the systems in which the students exist, and how the writing center becomes an activity system for both of these students when they enter either into the space or when they access our services. So my answer, again there, is not yet. It is an area of future study for me; personally, I'm highly interested in it.

I think maybe there's a clear connection, though, between decolonization and antiracism. So for decolonization, Garcia and Baca-- And I'm drawing on them and their introduction to *Rhetorics Elsewhere and Otherwise*. So Garcia and Baca put forth this idea of decolonization as being able to imagine an other future, an other ways of writing and being. I think that we can translate that into a writing center space. I know that Garcia has his own problems with the idea of centers and centering bodies and centering ideas and eventually the center itself has to be unraveled or whatever it is that he posits. And decolonization is like that as well, where it avoids this kind of active authoritativeness of being, saying, “you have to do it,” of clearly defining decolonization because you have this issue of X, Y, Z equals decolonialism or decolonization, and everything else is excluded. But decolonization, at its heart, is ways of imagining different kinds of rhetoric, different kinds of language use, different kinds of valuing of difference and what that looks like in different spaces. And so when I think about antiracism and thinking about all of the other “anti”s that go into it, particularly anti-hierarchical, right? So what happens when you break down the hierarchies between students and consultants, or students and-- or tutors and directors, or tutors and coordinators, and things like that. What happens-- what decolonial realities emerge when you focus on creating antiracist spaces that work to create equity?

I know I'm kind of dancing around the question, and it's only because I don't have a firm answer, so I apologize for that. As I mentioned at the very beginning, I am not an expert on antiracism. For me, it's an ongoing learning process, but I do see links here, and it is my hope in the future to draw these links more clearly between antiracism and activity theory, between antiracism and decolonization, or between all three of them together, with activity theory as kind of like maybe an overarching concept that can inhabit both.

**[Elle, facilitator]** Ok, thank you. Our next question is, “What are some of the similarities and differences between antiracist writing center pedagogy and the notion of linguistic diversity and the context of ESL writers or English as a second language?”

**[Eric]** Sure. I think ESL [English as a Second Language] writers have particular issues, or a set of maybe problems that are just different than people who are coming from different kinds of Englishes, right? Their relationship with the dominant discourse is going to be different. The way that they interact with it will be different. But when I think you have there, depending on contexts--

Well, I guess I can draw on some of my personal experience. Really, for me, when I work with ESL [English as a Second Language] students, they're focused on trying to master the language. They're very focused on trying to still learn or improve their understanding of standard American discourse, whereas students who are coming from different types of Englishes, so AAVE [Afrian American Vernacular English] or for us it's sometimes Spanglish. So they're coming from these other types of Englishes. They want their own English to be valued, or they feel more self conscious when they can't adhere to that standard discourse, especially when it comes to standard writing.

And so when it comes to trying to serve them, I think it's not necessarily something you can generalize, which maybe sounds like a cop-out and I apologize for that as well. But different students have different needs in different moments for different classes. I've definitely been in situations where even in my own family, I have people who are like, “Well, everyone should learn to speak correctly,” which to me is always kind of an insane proposition, right? Why this discourse and not another? Why this standard and not another? And you can think about maybe Laura Greenfield and her idea that the only reason these non-standard Englishes are not valued is because of the bodies that they're tied to, nothing to do really with the types of Englishes themselves. So when it comes to the differences between these populations of students, I think the key difference is their relationship with the dominant discourse and what they ultimately want from the writing center.

**[Elle, facilitator]** The next question is, “Do you have any tips to share about how to build a more diverse writing center staff?”

**[Eric]** Yes, [laugh] so something that I might recommend is looking at-- so if you have like job openings available, maybe trying to talk to leaders of Black student unions or Hispanic students associations or whatever they're called at your institution and trying to kind of plug these positions there as you're attempting to diversify a staff.

For me, though-- You may also want to try and coach up people who apply, right, so I've had students come from different backgrounds and different maybe non-standard discourses, who in their writing samples to me-- the writing samples themselves are not always like super clean or super perfect, but they came highly recommended from say faculty or their writing sample may not have been grammatically or technically perfect but has such interesting ideas, right? I had one student or one consultant who was writing about non-human rhetoric, which for me was very-- a new topic, and she was an undergraduate, and so I found her topic to be so fascinating. So even though there were a couple of misspellings here, a couple of missed commas or whatever there, like the total weight of that paper, to me, spoke to someone who knew writing and who knew how to convey ideas.

And so when it comes to trying to diversify your staff, it's not just about going into the places that they inhabit, right, so drawing on Black student unions or Hispanic student associations or other populations of students. It's also about examining your own criteria of judgments and how you assess papers and what you're willing to work with the student on that you want to bring into your space.

**[Elle, facilitator]** Excellent. Those are some really good suggestions. Some of them. I'm like, “Oh yeah, that's a great idea. I've never thought of that.”

**[Eric]:** [laughs]

**[Elle, facilitator]:** So our next question is about any sites or resources you would recommend for tutors to pass on to students when they're doing the asynchronous consultation. So, for example, on the topic of actually or potentially oppressive terms.

**[Eric]:** That a tutor can give to a student within a consultation?

**[Elle, facilitator]:** Yeah, do you have any kind of list of sites or resources that the tutors could give to students who might be kind of perpetuating some racism or something like that?

**[Eric]:** Not off the top of my head, but I have seen a few lists that are like that. Let me-- I'm going to make a quick note, Elle. If you want to maybe send that question to me later, I can try and address it.

**[Elle, facilitator]:** Yeah, definitely.

## Webinar Wrap Up

**[Sarah, facilitator]:** Okay, and I'm going to pop in just to round us out. I feel like, Eric, you've been on the hot seat for long enough at this point. So thanks for answering our questions. And when you get done taking that note, Eric, would you mind, sorry, advancing the slides for me?

**[Eric]:** Oh, sure.

**[Sarah, facilitator]:** Perfect. Oh wait, go one more. We already-- we’re past discussion logistics at this point. Yes, thank you. So again, thank you to all of you for attending our webinar today. I know that it is busy times, people have family demands, people have work demands, and so I really appreciate you all taking an hour and a half out of your day to attend our presentation. Again, many thanks to Eric Camarillo for his presentation today, and thank you to our two Morr interpreters for keeping up with us and for being our interpreters for today's session. And Eric if you’ll just advance the slides one more time?

Thank you. So this is our last webinar of 2020, but we really do hope that you'll join and contribute to the Online Writing Centers Association. Hopefully, if you all are members of the writing centers listserv, you saw our email that we now are an official association. We really hope that you'll become a member. Membership is currently free for both students and professionals. So please join. All it takes is a couple of clicks.

The event was free today, and if you found it helpful, we hope that you'll also donate. We love to have the interpreters here. We want to be able to continue to hire interpreters to make our events accessible, and the only way we can do that is through donations from this community.

We also have several opportunities for volunteering. You might have seen that we have six openings on our Executive Board. So we'd love to have you join us on our Executive Board. Those applications are due on November 6. So please send in those applications. We also have six committees. So if you feel like an Executive Board position might be more than you can take on at this point, please think about one of those committees. We'd love to have you sign up for those, too. If any of these things sound interesting to you, please get involved at OnlineWritingCenters.org.

Again, a big thank you to Eric, a big thank you to our interpreters. This was an insightful hour and a half, and we will let you all return to your days. Thanks so much.