

Empowering First-Year African American Students: Exploring Culturally-Responsive Learning Enhancements

by

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Abstract

This work is a two-semester examination of course materials, student production and student surveys in the Stretch Composition Program in the Department of Africana Studies at California State University, Northridge which demonstrates the use of culturally-affirming texts and imagery enhances the connection between African American students, course materials and concepts grounded in the Black aesthetic centered on Black agency and empowerment, exploring topics such as Black/African consciousness, South African freedom struggles, and systematic injustice, including the prison industrial complex through written texts and films. Utilizing a thematic analysis, the study also explored the impact of the Black aesthetic on students' ideas about their place within the contemporary political, social, and cultural milieu. The study revealed students see collective action as urgent and necessary; and that culturally-responsive learning materials and assignments provide an opportunity for students to express how they envisage their futures, and it argues that Africana Studies departments center the Black experience and are critical centers for nationwide collaboration in creating culturally-responsive course materials.

Keywords: Black aesthetic, student agency, student empowerment, Africana Studies, composition, Stretch Composition Program, culturally-responsive learning, African American students

Introduction

The Stretch Composition Program has been fully implemented, piloted, or proposed on at least 17 of the 23 California State University campuses. At California State University, Northridge (CSUN), Stretch Composition courses are taught as Approaches to University Writing. Currently, there are three levels of courses in Stretch at CSUN; students scoring in the lower and mid-range range of the English Placement Test “stretch” their composition requirement over the course of two semesters during their first year. Operating on the asset model of education, Stretch “[recognizes] that students bring all kinds of talents and interests and abilities” into the classroom and receive credit for each of their courses at the outset of their program (“Stretch All Videos,” 2013). The Stretch Program also allows for students to follow the same cohort, if desired, through both semesters for continuity with fellow students and the professor. Stretch Students are more successful, it is argued, because they have “more time to write, revise, and discuss writing” (California State University).

At CSUN, Stretch Composition is taught in six departments: Africana Studies, Asian American Studies, Central American Studies, Chicana/o Studies, English, and Queer Studies. Students have the opportunity to choose a department whose worldview, professors, literature, and environment are more suitable to their own cultural and intellectual preferences. Thus, both the discipline’s content and technical aspects of writing are important aspects of each course. Each of the Stretch courses must follow the same structure of assignments in their curriculum, modifying the assignments to its discipline’s objectives, perspectives, and learning outcomes. For example, in the first two of the three levels of Stretch, the fall semester’s courses cover the three progressions in the first semester; exercises within the progression are designed to scaffold the culminating writing assignment at the end of each progression. Building on the progressions, the second semester’s projects all start with critical reading, collaborative work, sometimes outside research, and culminate in group presentations, projects, and individual essays. The cohort that is the subject of this study is the fall and spring 113A-113B Approaches to University Writing class in the Department of Africana Studies during the 2016-2017 academic year. The students in the fall 2016 semester’s course were 80% African American; in the spring 2017 course, 76% of students were African American. While this project describes the course design and materials for the 2016-2017 academic year, the analysis of student production and surveys responses was conducted solely for the spring 2017 semester as students reached the end of their Stretch Composition program.

Theoretical Framework: Ethos, the Black Aesthetic, and Student Agency

The key aspect operating at the core of both the design of this course and students’ responses to it is ethos. Ethos, from an African-centered perspective, is the “commonness of spirit” that a people share from generations of common experiences, a common “historical circumstance” and a “shared cultural history” from Africa (Ani, 2004, pp. 2-3).

Ethos impacts the way in which people receive information, respond to it, and feel it in their spiritual senses. It tends to explain why people of African descent share a response or react in similar ways to life events and circumstances. Similarly, ethos is, in part, “the emotional substance of a cultural group...their collective ‘emotional tone’” (Ani, 2004, p. 2). Thus, the graphic assignments, the course outlines, the images, the videos, and the visual texts for this academic year-long program were all selected and created with that collective spirit in mind. The selections – through the lens of the Black aesthetic - were meant to evoke a commonality, a sense of belonging, a sense of agency, affirmation of culture - even an awakening of sorts, in my students. The red, gold, black and green colors are all part of the Pan African color scheme, often recognized by students as their own cultural property. Black faces on instructional videos, uplifting messages, and imagery that represents the forces of resistance to White Supremacy and illustrate possibilities for freedom were fashioned to speak to the current Black Lives Matter climate of our country. I purposefully chose films that modeled action and agency of Black youth in a brutally oppressive society to awaken that cultural spirit of resistance, resilience, and hope for the future. In this way, ethics and aesthetics are inextricable, according to Larry Neal, who points out that they hold a space in the cultural expression and action in the social struggles of Black people (1989). Similarly, Julian Mayfield argues, “[m]y Black Aesthetic is Bobby Seale, bound and gagged and straining at his leash in a Chicago courtroom” (1971, p. 27). Thus, in a program fashioned within the framework of the Black aesthetic, students are able to make connections to the materials, their lives, and their future.

The use of the Black aesthetic was essential to the design of the course materials as the course is housed in the Department of Africana Studies, which centers the global Black experience. Students of African descent also constituted the majority of students. Utilizing Black Consciousness was a deliberate attempt to frame the Black experience in positive imagery and concepts for first-year incoming freshman students. Since so much of what needs to be explored in the discipline is a global examination of the oppressive structures of White Supremacy, including Black people’s responses to it, I wanted to emphasize the foundational ideas that underpin the examination of the global Black experience during the first semester. Those foundational ideas, according to Steve Biko, are to eliminate the idea of Black inferiority, reframing the ideas of Blackness in positivity, strength, and pride. (Biko, 2002). It is within this paradigm - the Black aesthetic - that the course was designed.

First Semester Course Design: 113A Course Materials

The 113B course materials consisted of a written course outline and a complementary eText containing all of the readings, but also background information, additional links, reflection questions for films and readings, and certainly graphics to complement each of the progressions. The eText’s introductory page provided an explanation of the choice of the theme, relating it to the discipline and to the experiences of people of African descent in the United States.

While the eText explains that Steve Biko is the “father of Black Consciousness,” it also defines Black Consciousness as a global experience and notes that “all materials in the course will be examined from an African-centered perspective” (Lo, 2016a). This explanation is followed by a graphic syllabus that delineates each of the three progressions, each with a graphic that represents the focus of the progression. Defining Black Consciousness’s image is a raised Black fist, Interacting with Representations of Blackness is represented by the South African flag, and Space Traders and Black America’s icon is a rocket ship. Each of the assignments for the progressions is detailed in its corresponding section. There are also sections that summarize attendance policies, describe the weight percentages for the course assignments, and suggestions for course success. Hyperlinks give explanations to aspects of the course such as a detailed explanation of a flipped course. The graphic syllabus utilizes black text over three of the Pan African colors – red, yellow, and green as its base color scheme.

Course Structure and Content

Progression One, or reading and responding to texts in the Stretch curriculum, provided theoretical foundation for the course through the unit Defining Black Consciousness. Students read “The Definition of Black Consciousness” by Steve Biko (2002). *Cry Freedom* (1999) offered the visual context to the brutality of apartheid and the development of an intellectual such as Biko. Prior to watching the film, students read Roger Ebert’s review of the problematic nature of the film. I also provided an explanation for using it in class, along with an offer for supplemental materials that centralize Steve Biko. Two additional articles by Biko were read by students, followed by some conceptual ideas by Marimba Ani (1997). Within this unit, were hip hop videos that discussed the global African experience (Gelongal Video, 2010), and instructional videos on technical aspects of writing with embedded quizzes created by the professor. These topics included critical reading and summary writing, letter writing, writing as a process, outlining, thesis statements, topic sentences, introductions, and conclusions. The instructional videos included both lecture-type videos narrated by the professor and animated videos with a computer-generated voice. All videos were captioned for accessibility. Students write a letter to one of the authors of the texts to reflect on their critical reading and start summarizing ideas in an academic environment. The final visual literature of the unit was the film, *The Language You Cry In* (1998), a film that connects Mary Moran, a Gullah woman, and her family to their ancestral village in Sierra Leone through a song she learned from her mother. The family travels to meet their family in Sierra Leone and reconnects with their African culture and ancestry. Students write a summary of the film to practice critical “reading” of the text. The culminating essay for Progression One asks students to consider the contemporary importance of Black Consciousness to people of African descent.

Progression Two's purpose is to engage students with visual rhetoric. It begins with a critical reading of Black symbols, followed by a word picture descriptive assignment, then asks students to create a dialogue, ethnography, and culminates with an essay assignment. This progression, entitled *Interacting with Representations of Blackness*, introduces students to the symbols of Blackness through the aesthetics of the hip hop group Dead Prez's video of the song "Beauty Within" (Kinetik Cinematix, 2011). The song is an affirmation of Black women, highlighting the natural beauty and character of Black women. Natural Black hairstyles are centered in the visual text. The video is also a testament to powerful Black women such as Angela Davis, Afeni Shakur, Assata Shakur, and Nina Simone, who are all pictured. In this way, Dead Prez aligns activism and Black empowerment with beauty. Once students discuss and reflect on symbolism in the Black aesthetic, they move to a picture that they must describe in detail. Students were presented with 5 pictures that they could choose from as an in-class writing activity. The first, and largest graphic, was a scene resulting from the #Rhodesmustfall movement at the University of Cape Town, South Africa in which students are celebrating the destruction of the statue of a prolific White Supremacist, Cecil Rhodes. The smaller pictures depicted a boy running from a South African policeman who was attempting to whip the boy, women of South Africa protesting in front of a tank, and two of Black women protesting in Ferguson, Missouri after the murder of Michael Brown by former officer Darren Wilson in 2014. Students then wrote or filmed a creative dialogue in order to "interact" with someone in one of the images. The visual text that students interact with most in this unit, is the film, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (2003). The eText provided a film review that sums up the environment of the film, along with an animated video that introduces some of the basic concepts of ethnography. To scaffold the upcoming essay, students completed a collaborative ethnography activity around the film to be able to "observe" the symbols, images, songs and dances and their purposes for the people in the documentary. Students could then begin to organize their ideas in preparation for the culminating essay, which asked students to write about the ideas expressed through images, symbols, songs and dances of the people of South Africa from the film. The eText also contained an embedded instructional video on citations.

Arguing through Texts is the final progression of the Stretch first-semester curriculum. Like other progressions, it scaffolds the essay with various preparatory assignments that build on each other. My students' unit was entitled *The Space Traders and Black America*, focusing on "The Space Traders" chapter in Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1993). Students watch the video version of the story from *Cosmic Slop* (Constellation62, 2011). They also read various pieces of United States' legislation such as parts of The Military Commissions Act, The National Defense Authorization Act, and the Patriot Act as they learned about the suspension of habeas corpus. The eText links readings of historical events such as Native American removals, Japanese-American internment, and contemporary articles on the erosion of voting rights for African Americans. They read "The Space Traders," the final chapter in Bell's text (1993) and worked on finding the arguments made by Bell's chapter. It is a compelling piece that operates in some future time where America is deplete of natural resources, has poor air quality, and is in financial collapse.

Aliens arrive from outer space and offer the United States a vacuumed and renewed air supply, and a fortune that would revitalize the economy for decades if the government would simply hand over its Black population to an unknown fate. The chapter takes the reader through the various referendums and the back-room deals of those in power, ultimately making the removal of African Americans palatable to the American public. The referendum passes. Black people are removed from this country the same way they arrived – by force. Students utilized their contextual reading materials to argue their positions in a class debate on the possibility of this occurring based solely on historical and legal precedence. This oral debate, one of the class's favorite activities, becomes invaluable preparation for the creation of a logical argument with evidence necessary for their essay; The Progression Three essay duplicates this debate in written form. The progressions have essentially provided the writing foundation for the projects. At this stage, students had also watched an instructional video on argumentative essays. All of the videos that students watched contained embedded quizzes for which they received a grade. It is important to note that all of the animated videos utilized male and female characters of African descent and used culturally-affirming language wherever possible to facilitate the particular topic for the video lesson. Students also participated in the peer review process and wrote an essay reflecting on their growth as writers. They had also been orally prepared for the format of the second semester of Stretch Composition.

Second Semester Course Design: 113B

Course Materials

The course theme for the second semester of the Stretch cohort, 113B, was The Permanence of Racism: Structural Injustice and the Possibilities for Freedom. A complementary eText was not created to graphically guide students through the course with contextual graphics. Instead, students sourced their reading materials from hyperlinks or uploads on their Learning Management System (LMS) course page; films were viewed during some class sessions. However, students were provided with a graphic syllabus that detailed each project's requirements with complementary graphics. For example, the graphic for Project Text was a picture of Thandisizwe Chimurenga's book (2014) read by the students; it shared the same name as the module of the course, *No Doubt: The Murder(s) of Oscar Grant*. Project Space's unit entitled The Prison Industrial Complex, the Police, and the War on Black People contained a logo of the Corrections Corporation of America. The graphic for Project Media's unit entitled The Global Fruits of Defiance was a picture of Black people protesting injustice. The graphic syllabus also illustrated a summary of the course attendance policies, grade-weight percentages for each of the course's requirements in the form of a pie chart, and tips for success in the course – each including a graphic representation of the idea.

The demographics of this semester's course were similar to the first: 76% of the students were of African descent, 69% of whom had been in the previous semester's 113A course; the remaining were Latinx-identified with the exception of one, who was white-identified. While both Black and Latinx students share a history of oppression, it is important to validate these communities' experiences separately and not reduce the particular Black experience in America to one labeled People of Color. The discipline of Africana Studies can be the one place in which the Black experience is centered for our students. This is critical for a more holistic understanding of the past, present and the future possibilities for Black people; just the act of centering the Black experience in that positive space can be life-affirming and eye-opening for Black students who have been "othered" in the majority, if not all, educational environments in their lives and beyond. In addition, non-Black students are afforded the opportunity to gain perspectives about the Black experience within the positive circle of the Africana Studies classroom. These ideas are in alignment with the student learning outcomes of the Department of Africana Studies at CSUN, which empowers students to be able to "evaluate and analyze the political, social-historical and cultural perspectives of African and African Diaspora communities" (Africana Studies, 2017). The Department of Africana Studies at CSUN was created out of the struggle and necessity for such courses and spaces, and it is important to carry on its mission to inform and inspire the next generation of activists and scholars.

The course outline cover announced the theme of the course in a large red font. Under the title, is a graphic with a young man holding a folder, which indicates that he is a representation of young Black males. There are two windows at the counter he is approaching that have thick partitions between them. One of the windows is labeled "Affirmative Action: A Quality Education, a Decent Job, a Fair Shake." It has a sign on the counter in front of the window that says "Out to Lunch." There is a black sign with white text to the right of that sign that says "Next Window Please," with an arrow pointing to the right. The window to the right says "Preferential Incarceration: Open 24/7. Here to Serve You." The theme and project modules are labeled with a green font, and the rest of the text is black.

Course Structure and Content

Project Text allows for an in-depth analysis of a text. This class utilized Thandisizwe Chimurenga's *No Doubt: The Murder(s) of Oscar Grant* (2014), which examines the murder of Oscar Grant's character in the media and the judicial system as well as his murder through the actions of Bay Area Rapid Transit Police Department's officers Johannes Mersele and Anthony Pirone. The unit was introduced by a red, black, and green assignment graphic with the book's cover. The graphic assigned students to work collaboratively to perform a thematic analysis of the text and write individual essays. Thematic analysis was briefly explained, followed by the technical essay requirements, and hyperlinked graphics for self-assessment and group assessments. Directly under the embedded red, black, yellow and green assignment graphic on the LMS page, was the instructional video on thematic analysis.

The thematic analysis video contained bullet-pointed PowerPoint slides inserted into an animated video with a professionally-dressed Black woman narrating the presentation. The video defines a thematic analysis and explains that a theme in literature is often viewed as a universal idea; from an African-centered perspective, the video explains, the ideas or wisdom contained in themes apply uniquely to the experiences of people of African descent. The examples of themes were created from the course materials; thus the video provided themes from *The House I Live In* (2013), *Slavery By Another Name* (2012), and even *Space Traders* (2011) from the previous semester's course texts. The lesson then guides students to create a thematic thesis statement. A sample outline was provided with the type of topic sentences that could support a thematic analysis thesis statement. Finally, the video moved to the course text being explored for the current semester, guiding students through the steps of a thematic analysis.

Project Text was augmented by connecting the events discussed in the Chimurenga text to its visual complement, *Fruitvale Station* (2014), a film that not only replays the actual video of the murder of Oscar Grant, but also connects the students emotionally to Grant's role as a father, boyfriend, friend, and family member. His daughter Tatiana is shown at the end. Hardly anyone had dry eyes in the classroom. Moreover, students' connection to this text was further enhanced by the professor organizing a campus visit by the author. Students were empowered to ask questions and many of them were able to have their books signed. This was a meaningful event for them, particularly at the beginning of their college journey, and the impact was visible in their excitement.

Project Space introduced the prison industrial complex to students through a reading from *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012) by Michelle Alexander. They also read an African American Policy Forum report entitled "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected" (2016). This report's aesthetics center the innocence and sweetness of Black girls through close-ups of their expressions. The films shown in this unit were *The House I Live In* (2013), which provided a concise and up close and personal view of the war on drugs and the connection between the police, the judicial system, legislators, and a war on the Black community. *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison* (1998), a documentary about the lives of a few select inmates as representative of the system employed at Angola State Prison in Louisiana, served to create an emotional bond between students and the incarcerated population or at least remove the distance through the personal stories. The visual of prison authorities riding on horseback while Black prisoners worked in the prison fields was haunting, particularly with the knowledge that the prison was built on the site of a former slavery plantation. In addition, students viewed *Slavery by Another Name* (2012), which presents the contemporary dynamic of the hyper-prosecution and hyper-policing policies from slavery and slave catchers to the present on a historical continuum.

An instructional animated video introducing the Project Space assignment was hyperlinked to the LMS page. It discussed that spaces are physical, psychological and spiritual. A Black woman character guides students through their analysis of a space, asking students to consider the purpose of their selected space design, the cultural aesthetics, the function of the space in relation to the culture of its participants, and the messages that are given to the people who enter the space. The video asked students to reflect on the ways in which Black people are treated in the space, the response of the local community, the impact on Black families - including future generations. Finally, the video provides students the opportunity to view the investigation of Black people themselves as a psychological and physical space. Since Black people and their physical bodies were used as a labor force to build the wealth of the United States, and they continue to serve the prison industrial complex, experience police terror, and the lack of opportunities, the video prompted students to consider what living in this environment may mean for Black people's physical and mental health and the development of healthy Black families. Students were encouraged to consider sites of empowerment and agency for Black people as a space to investigate for their assignment. Regardless of the students' choice for a space to examine, the assignment required students to explore the space's relationship to larger structures – institutional, governmental, and cultural, in order to determine the impact of those connections on Black people.

Students are also guided by a red, black, yellow, and green graphic assignment to work collaboratively to do research and field work to interrogate a space “in terms of race and the politics of space” and consider the ways in which the space “affects Black people/people of African descent” (Lo, 2016b). The graphic offers students examples of the types of spaces that could be examined such as a college campus, a court room, the educational system, the police, and Blackness as a psychological space. There are other individual essay requirements listed on the graphic assignment such as the minimum scholarly sources required, and the word count, along with hyperlinks for self-assessment and a group assessment.

Project Media was introduced to through the lens of a short YouTube clip of Rahiel Tesfamariam, the founder and Editorial Director of Urban Cusp, discussing the ways in which everyone has a part in the struggle for freedom. In that clip, Tesfamariam argues that the first revolution is the revolution of the mind (Urban Cusp, 2016). With that idea of inclusion, there were two graphic assignments embedded in the LMS giving students a choice to create a website, blog or a video. Both assignment graphics, like all others used in class, were red, gold, and green with black text that invite students to work collaboratively to do research and then individually write about a theme related to the module of the course entitled “The Global Fruits of Defiance” such as Black protest, organization, boycotts, civil disobedience, and struggles for liberation, regardless of physical location. There were other essay requirements on the graphics, along with guides for purpose, intended audience, and dividing up the work for the blog, website, or video. There are also hyperlinked graphics for various resources on campus. Central to this project was the agency and empowerment of Black people. This was modeled through the purposeful selection of visual literature for this section of the course.

The literature of Project Media, *The Global Fruits of Defiance*, exposed students to the content primarily through the medium of documentary film, replete with images of fierce resistance, defiance, and Black people's refusal to back down – even in the face of Western-backed tanks and arms of the Apartheid Regime. These are powerful images that focus largely on the youth struggle of South Africa. Since the professor's doctoral research focused on the liberation struggle of South Africa, students received a great deal of context for the images. Specifically, students viewed *Any Child Is My Child* (1988), *Fruits of Defiance* (1990), *Bound to Strike Back* (1986). The final piece of literature students watched was *Have You Heard from Johannesburg? Apartheid and the Club of the West* (2006), a film that introduces the idea that the international struggle against apartheid manifested in many spaces and places. Specifically, the documentary illustrated the protests of African American politicians, and the organization of the divestment movement on American college campuses as part of the larger international struggle against apartheid. For me, this aspect of the film was an important way to empower students and give them concrete examples of youth agency in America. The discussions before and after the film were aimed at instilling the idea that young people, particularly young Black people, have and can change their local circumstances and the world.

Throughout this module, I purposely modeled the process. I pointed out why I chose each of the films, facilitated the discussions towards the ideas of youth empowerment, connecting them to ways in which they could engage in similar activities in their own communities, and discussed the ways in which images empowered consciousness and led to action in the South African liberation struggle, which was a familiar topic to many of the students who took the 113A course in the fall. For the final project of the semester, all six groups chose to create blogs to highlight the ideas they wished to present. Three of the groups created a blog around some aspect of The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). Black Lives Matter was the focus of two blogs, and The Civil Rights Movement was the topic for one.

Methodology

While this study describes the learning materials and process over an academic year of Stretch Composition, its primary findings examine the students' Project Media blogs completed in the second semester. Project Media is explored in-depth because it was the culmination of all of their learning at the end of the academic year. It was also the project that allowed students an abundance of space for their intellectual and creative agency because it is a visual project that utilizes new media as an avenue of critical reading and writing. Thus, Project Media would be the project most likely to reveal their ideas about their connection to the Black aesthetic and the experiences of the Black community. A thematic analysis was conducted on all six projects to determine how students responded to the concepts and ideas presented throughout the semester through their creative assignment.

Particularly important was to assess the ways in which students placed themselves in relation to history, contemporary political and social movements, and self-determination and liberation for Black people. In addition to the thematic evaluation of Project Media, students in the spring 2017 semester completed voluntary surveys regarding their perceptions of the visual learning enhancements and visual texts.

Findings

Analysis of Student Production: Project Media

The last project, Project Media, is presented to the entire university. Members of the University Writing Council, university administrators, students, and faculty are invited. This is a celebrated event where freshman composition students proudly present the fruits of their labor. One group's Black Panther Party blog entitled "Black Panther Party" indicated the group's support for the BPP within its chosen URL. The founders of the BPP, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, were described in students' posts, along with a brief description of their history of working in Black communities (Group 1). The context for a group like BPP was described by students as a need for self-defense for Black communities - particularly from police brutality, a cessation of impoverishment of Black communities, and a lack of opportunities (Group 1). The BPP's Ten Point Program was detailed and described as a way to "empower other African Americans" (Group 1). The blog also detailed some of the lesser known aspects of the BPP such as the movement for tenant's rights and the Free Breakfast Program. It lamented the destruction of the Party through the acts of the United States' Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Students praised the ways in which the BPP was able to grow through its use of imagery and also critiqued the way in which it might have gone too far and appeared to be "propaganda" (Group 1). The blog went on to applaud examples of equity for women in the BPP, using Elaine Brown's role in organizing the Free Breakfast for Children program as an example. Students also wrote about physical and sexual abuse that women suffered in the Party. In further posts, students described the BPP as "representatives" (Group 1) of the Black community, particularly in its fight against police brutality and push for the manifestation of the rights for Black people. The blog contained many pictures of The Black Panther Party, including pictures of Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Kathleen Cleaver, along with images of children who were served breakfast. The student authors also posted a picture of themselves, all wearing black jackets, with their fists raised, with "The Creators" in white text placed over the image. Students' facial expressions and body language indicate a sense of self-respect, strength, and power. While this picture obviously honored the BPP, it also suggested that the students connect their purpose for the blog, perhaps even their place in the world, with The Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Moreover, it was the largest photo presented in the blog, which further indicates that the students saw themselves as actors in this contemporary milieu that continued to necessitate the struggle for freedom for people of African descent.

The Uprising of the Black Panther Party student blog began with a short description of the BPP's purpose as the first group in America to "militantly struggle for ethnic minority and working class emancipation" in the "establishment of real economic, social, and political equality across gender and color lines" (Group 2). The background picture is that of a panther, the BPP logo, adjacent to the famous picture of Huey P. Newton seated in a wicker chair, which in and of itself operates as an anti-colonial statement. The first post on this blog describes the Oakland Community School that was set up to teach children about their history and culture and to bring "confidence amongst the black students that attended" (Group 2). Directly underneath the post, was a quote by Angela Davis asserting the importance of committing to struggle for a lifetime. Instead of a series of posts, the page was filled with images. One graphic showed the fictional Banks family from the 1990s TV sitcom *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* holding their fists in the air, followed by a description of the significance of this symbol. A clip from the movie *Panther* (1998) was also posted. Below, a graphic was posted with a picture of women in the BPP, stating that 70% of the BPP were women. On the same graphic, a quote from Kwamé Turé argued that the BPP was really run by the women of the party (Group 2). Another graphic with the BPP logo appears with the words "Power to the people...then and now" (Group 2). Others included a clip from the comedic sitcom *Everybody Hates Chris* with starring actor Tyler James Williams, who is African American, holding his fist in the air while his fellow white students place their hands over their heart for the national anthem. The remaining images were pictures of the BPP – including one of an armed Huey P. Newton, a clip of Angela Davis from *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975* (2011), and a video clip of Angela Davis entering the courtroom during her 1972 trial, for which she was acquitted on charges of murder, kidnapping and criminal conspiracy. Also highlighted was actor and film producer Melvin Van Peebles along with memes with expressions such as "Respect and Protect the Black Woman," "I Love Being Black," and "Black and Proud" (Group 2). Textual posts on this blog engaged the racist violence that led to the creation of the BPP, their "rise to power," and the resistance movement in general (Group 2). Individual posts paid homage to the film contributions of Melvin Van Peebles in *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (1971), discussed the beating of London-based BPP member Olive Morris by London police, and the attacks on the BPP in Oakland. The most salient of these blog posts was one in which a student proudly connected the BPP to his own family. His grandmother became active in creating a free breakfast program in Pittsburgh, where there had previously been no official Panther chapter. She later met her partner, who had to live life on the run due to his activism. The student described the impact of the BPP on his father's life, helping to "make him the man he is today" (Group 2). The symbolism and heroic nature of The Party, he wrote, instilled a sense of pride in him that made him consider joining one of the Panther-inspired youth programs, like the one created by Colin Kaepernick (Group 2).

The final blog that focused on the Black Panther Party for Self Defense commenced with a post about the BPP's Oakland Chapter's Intercommunal Youth Institute. The Institute, students wrote, replaced the government schools which failed to provide Black children the necessary critical thinking skills for "[surviving] in a white supremacist country" (Group 3).

The school empowered children through their history, culture and cultural practices in order to “connect them with their roots” (Group 3). The initial post is followed by a brief summary of the work of Fred Hampton, chair of the Chicago chapter of the BPP. He was described as “a hero to African Americans” who “stood up for Black liberation, socialism and revolution” (Group 3). Black power, students wrote, meant “strength and unity among Black people” and helped them to “build confidence together” (Group 3). Another post described the Chicago chapter’s recruitment of young doctors in creating a free medical clinic for the Black community. A particular mention was made of the resilience of the program in spite of the harassment by city officials (Group 3). A post about the 1969 shoot-out between the BPP and the Los Angeles Police Department at 41st and Central “shows the pride that the Black Panthers have towards their community” because they refused to allow the police to degrade them and arrest them on trumped up charges such as loitering (Group 3). BPP, students observed, “stood up for each other together” and were willing to sacrifice their lives for their community (Group 3). A post was dedicated to the life of Afeni Shakur, who was particularly remarkable to students because of her famous son, Tupac Shakur. The post ended with a charge for people of African descent to “help continue this movement in order to have freedom and be recognized as a normal citizen in this country” (Group 3). The success of the BPP, a post argues, stemmed from people’s desire to volunteer and work together for the for the good of the community. Many of the same gains could be achieved today in the Black community “if we can use these same methods that the Black Panther Party used” (Group 3). The African American community, students argued, need to unify against the systemic injustice, creating global awareness of the “horrific events” inflicted upon the innocent (Group 3). Showing a force of strength and unity “like the Panthers once did,” students observed, will let the oppressors know that Black people will no longer allow the lie of White Supremacy to govern their thoughts and actions. This type of communal action will, according to students, create a measure of safety and protection for the Black community where the laws and law enforcement fail (Group 3).

The blog entitled “The Next Generation of Black Lives Matter Movement” was created to galvanize “new school black resistance” (Group 4). The students wanted to create an awareness of police brutality and systematic oppression of Black men and women. Specifically, it seeks to provide an avenue for Black people to “respond to these situations through the use of civil disobedience, protest, and knowledge of the Bill of Rights” (Group 4). Its first post contained photos of protests and one of The Bill of Rights. It continues with a post detailing the milieu that birthed the Black Lives Matter movement under an embedded video of Tupac’s song “Changes” (1998). Other posts detailed various community responses to police murders of Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray - all containing video footage of protests and African American artists’ responses to these constant contemporary challenges of the Black community. At this stage in the blog, students had already identified themselves as the actors in the title of their blog, announcing their agency: “As the new generation of #BLM we need to realize what power comes if everyone works as one to fight for our people....We will be heard” (Group 4).

Students explained that Black people need to “take action and contribute more to the movement” so that Black people “are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise within our nation” (Group 4). Protesting and getting involved, students pointed out, “will teach others of institutionalized racism,” and creates an awareness of the challenges of poverty, violence against Black women and children, and the prison industrial complex. Key to this awareness, according to students, is the education of young Black children so they may “develop an understanding of how America really is towards African Americans” (Group 4). The post also asserted that it is important to withhold support of organizations, specifically media, that create negative images of African Americans, arguing that the impact on the Black community is tremendous (Group 4). The blog then turned to provide pathways for activism and involvement. It listed the importance of knowing The Bill of Rights, becoming an activist, forming protest groups both nationally and internationally, and getting connected to like-minded, ready to respond individuals through the student blog. It asked others to add current events to help to “create an awareness of the contemporary struggles [Black people] face within their own communities” (Group 4). Students argued that Black Lives Matter “is being too passive” and that the movement needs “new tactics to penetrate this corrupted government” (Group 4). Student suggested creating a movement on campus, noting that universities are the perfect place to make a change” just as it was in the previous decades (Group 4). Courage is what is needed to get involved and stand up for what is right, the post stated, and this new generation of activists should “fight for those who have passed and for the future of black children, women, and men. This movement needs to go worldwide. Stand up and make a difference” (Group 4).

Another group of students engaged the Black Lives Matter movement through the concept of koinotophobia, the fear of change, beginning with a quote from Afeni Shakur declaring that people’s tolerance for oppression has led to an idea that it is the “normal state of things” (Group 5). This blog, Black Lives Must Matter, urged people to join in activism, stating that Black Lives matter is not merely a hashtag, but rather a “voice for the Black lives that have been killed, neglected and brutally hurt by systematic oppression (Group 5). It is a movement that empowers the LGBTQ community and is “an affirmation of Black people’s empowerment to this society by physically and mentally showing our cultural values and mindset...by being unapologetically Black” (Group 5). The blog highlighted the murders of Aiyanna Stanley Jones, the criminalization of youth in Baltimore and protests in Cambridge, Detroit, Los Angeles, Oakland, Ferguson, pointing to the start of the movement following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin. The graphics of the blog were black and orange, allowing the viewer to see more depth in the photos – most of which showed Black people protesting in unity. The remaining two photos depict Tupac Shakur and Trayvon Martin, two symbols of consciousness for students. The picture of Tupac is accompanied by his “the darker the flesh, then the deeper the roots” lyric” (2Pac and Outlawz, 1999, Track 4, cited in Group 5). The blog, in several places, urged others to join the movement, providing hyperlinks to Black Lives Matter Twitter and Facebook pages. Students pointed to the achievements of the movement thus far and observe that it is an inclusive movement for all generations (Group 5).

The African American Civil Rights Movement blog focused on key moments in history: The Brown vs. the Board of Education case, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Selma to Montgomery March, The Voting Rights Act, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the March on Washington. A post on the violence of the Ku Klux Klan and a general discussion on segregation provided a context for a discussion of these historic events. The Civil Rights Movement, the blog noted, was built on “peaceful protest and civil disobedience” (Group 6). While the blog points to Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and W.E.B. DuBois as key figures in the movement, Dr. King, they asserted, is the primary figure of this movement, known for his famous “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington. This particular march’s purpose, according to students, was “to bring people together for equality” (Group 6). It noted the celebrity participation, both white and Black, and hyperlinked and quoted Dr. Martin Luther King’s speech. One post focused on Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson’s work on The Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was key to The Voting Rights Act of 1965, students argued, and this piece of legislation “allowed more Blacks to enter political life at the local, state, and national levels” (Group 6). The blog tied the historic events to the present through a post on contemporary protest and a more general fight for equality in the United States. Students tied women’s rights, gay rights, and immigration rights to the struggle against oppression for African Americans. The Civil Rights Movement would not have been possible were it not for “those who took a stand against the segregated system” (Group 6); this struggle is still necessary, students observed, because “Blacks are continually isolated in today’s world just like in 1970” (Group 6). The graphics, in both photos and embedded clips from the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary, portray protest and achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. A video posted depicted white mobs chasing Black students, police attacking protesters, segregated facilities, the harassment of Hazel Massery by a white mob, James Brock pouring muriatic acid in the pool of the Monson Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Florida, and Ruby Bridges being escorted by the National Guard. The blog also highlighted student collaboration and protest

Survey Analysis

All students in the spring 2017 113B class were surveyed to determine their own ideas about the visual learning tools utilized in the classroom. More in-depth questions were asked of the students, 70%, who were also in the fall 2016 113A course because the first module of the course focused on the value of Black Consciousness. They also spent weeks analyzing the images, symbols and songs of the Black South African struggle for freedom during the fall 2016 semester. In addition, they had the unique experience of having a class with an eText companion and one without; they also watched many more instructional videos in the 113A course since the first semester of stretch necessarily covers many of the foundational aspects of essay writing. 93% of those students said they found the instructional videos useful. Those who did not find them useful admitted to not having watched them.

When probing further about the utility of such videos, students responded that they acted as “a guide,” (Student 10) getting “straight to the point,” (Student 8) and creating a “better understanding” (Student 7) for students. Such understandings are gained because the instructional videos created a “visual association” to what was taught in the classroom (Student 3). Students also noted that the videos guided students to structure the essays “exactly how [the professor] wanted” (Student 2). Furthermore, understanding the overall process of writing through a visual representation helped students to understand the necessity and importance of writing throughout their academic journeys (Student 9). One student even noted that the videos were more useful for their learning than the writing textbook used in the course (Student 5). All students surveyed from the two-semester cohort discussed the importance of being able to return to the videos for questions on an assignment, for reference, and to remember.

The second semester of Stretch contained just two instructional videos. Still, 100% of the students found them useful in their learning, primarily because they helped to scaffold the assignments (Student 1B; Student 2B; Student 4B) and because they were available to be replayed (Student 3B). Of all of the students in the class, 55% stated that it was important that Black characters were used in the instructional animated videos. Students noted that Black characters should be used in an Africana Studies class (Student 10) since the material focuses on Black people (Student 2), but also that these characters made “the video easier to relate to” (Student 13), gave students “a better connection to what [they are] learning” (Student 3B), and made the students “feel a little more empowered and engaged into learning the material” (Student 4B). Others, even those who answered that the color of the characters did not matter to them “as much as it should” (Student 9), pointed out that it was important to see an African American image “for once” (Student 12). Those who felt that the race of the characters was unimportant, 40% of all students, generally noted that as long as they received the information they needed, the videos were useful.

Films As Visual Texts

Nearly 100% of all students observed the importance of using films as texts. Student responses described the ability of films to help students gain “a better insight” (Student 5) and “deeper connection” (Student 2) with the people, the context of the film and the subject matter in the course. Some students were already aware of their learning styles and made the connections between the visual nature of the learning material and their ability to understand and retain the information. Students also argued that the films provided important examples and a broader idea of the concepts that they needed to complete their project assignments. The visual texts were motivating and helped students to generate ideas for their assignments. The visuals, students noted, “allowed students to correlate the videos back to what they needed to write about” (Student 2).

Discussion

Visual images that are culturally affirming allow students to tap into that vital life force energy to manifest their greatness. It seems quite plausible that student responses to the visual imagery of their course were at least impacted by commonality of spirit among people of African descent. Student pride in presenting their Project Media blogs to the university was palpable. They discussed systemic White Supremacy with confidence and declared the possibilities for its dismantling in front of university administrators through contemporary and historical examples. Student production, in many ways, echoed the concepts of the materials they were exposed to throughout the semester, but their work also revealed their negation of essentialist celebrations of liberation-oriented organizations. Student agency was perhaps most reflected in their critiques of historical movements and their urgency in calling for the creation of contemporary movements and action. Thus, as students processed the connections between the past and the present, it was not surprising that two groups of students focused their projects on Black Lives Matter, recognizing that the conditions that necessitated resistance in the 1960s continue and that concerted communal action remains, in their minds, an important aspect of the path to freedom in America. The strength of their voices and the clarity of their messages ascended from the projects, declaring the possibilities for freedom and justice, even the dismantling of White Supremacy through unity and struggle. Finally, the use of Black characters in instructional videos, and the use of affirming language and imagery that Black students connected with in the learning materials was essential. For many students, this was the first time they had seen a Black character in an educational video.

Limitations

This study was an examination of the culmination of a one-year cohort in one department at one university. Its data was qualitative, and measured through just one cohort. Some students left the cohort after the first semester, and a few arrived during the second semester; thus, there might have been less variation had all of the students remained through the cohort. The instructor who taught the class will be limited in some ways in examining her own students' work, albeit thematically, while at the same time, the instructor is the one person who knows exactly what was said in the classroom each and every day. A longitudinal study over the course of a few years would provide more data and thus, a better indication of the correlation between the concepts and ideas presented in the course materials and students' ideas about their connectivity to them.

Recommendations

Reflecting upon the creative production of students and their responses to a Black aesthetic which centers Black agency and empowerment, the absolute power of the visual image in framing our realities, our worldview, our opinions on events, our connection to the people in the story is clear; thus, it is essential to challenge our own resistance to the use of visual texts in writing courses. Our use of imagery should reflect the values we wish to share with our students in order to contextualize the messages they will encounter. This generation is undoubtedly one that is engaged by visual images, visual texts, and interactive pedagogies; this knowledge provides an incredible opportunity for faculty to take advantage of the technologies available in order to create more culturally-responsive images and visual texts that reflect the values of our students, embracing and affirming their culture. The use of Black faces in learning materials alone is insufficient; the messages of empowerment and examples of self-determination of Black youth globally are critical for students to see their own possibilities and the possibilities of African people around the world. Surveying students about their learning environment allows us to have some knowledge about their cultural connection to the materials and images that they experience in the classroom, but certainly, a more longitudinal study, perhaps with focus groups, may be able to provide the empirical data to support the growth in critical thinking and the increase in the depth of the analysis that I witnessed anecdotally from my students. Further research may show that students' connections to culturally-responsive learning materials may impact learning in ways that we have not yet imagined. Just as the concept of ethos is difficult to describe in words, I struggle to articulate the sense of pride I saw in my students. Their class work illuminated their ideas about their power in the quest for justice in America and beyond. This alone asks us all to work harder to create a culturally-affirming environment for learning, necessitating Africana Studies as a discipline now more than ever. Thus, Africana Studies departments, where the global African experience is centered, should be designated as essential centers for collaboration with educational institutions as well as agencies and programs that endeavor to serve Black students, Black families, and Black people around the world.

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