Context and Questions

- March 2012: Cornell created the university-wide diversity initiative “Toward New Destinations”
- Sara Ahmed, prominent scholar of race and gender, critiques whether diversity initiatives engage issues or simply act as PR for institutions of higher education (On Being Included 2012)

I wondered:
1) How might mandatory first-year writing seminars enable undergraduates learn to engage with topics of race as a facet of diversity?
2) How does an institutional mandate trickle down from administration to on the ground pedagogical and learning practices?

Student Survey Comments

Suggestions for Teaching Race and Writing
- “Students should be urged to identify and abandon westernized thinking when trying to analyze diverse texts”
- “Little activities regarding race and identity. Try to make things personal!”
- “Relating modern-day perceptions of race to the literature that we read”

Perspectives on Successful Lessons
- “Discussion” between students that brings ideas from different people together and gives new light for students in the class”
- “Examples of historical/cultural contexts for literature are helpful, as well as guided discussions”

Analysis: student preference for discussion as a mode for learning about race indicates a wariness of writing despite stated confidence

Conclusions About Teaching and Learning

- Student responses indicate the helpfulness of the first-year writing seminar for learning about race but writing is not seen as essential to the process
- Students value peers as much or more than instructors: importance of horizontal teaching approaches
- The first-year writing seminar is a valuable site for undergraduates to engage with diversity on an academic level because of the seminar format, its nature as a mandatory requirement, and potential to have the greatest variety of Cornell undergraduates as peers

Instructor Interview Comments

Student Attitudes and Difficulties
- Students tend to engage in “Pushing back on well-intentioned but ultimately problematically under-thought commitments to universal humanism and a restrictive definition of racism as only a matter of personal feeling”
- “They seem hesitant to say the wrong thing but definitely interested and appreciate the conversations.”

Tactics for Teaching
- “They really seem to respond to the documentary format. I also teach texts writing by North American Native people alongside the Westerners that portray them, and the contrast is useful for students”
- “I’ve also related themes from that same novel to more recent cultural texts they can relate to. I require my students to connect various themes (including racism) to works or current events that are important to them.”

Conclusions About Diversity at Cornell

- No students or instructors knew about “Toward New Destinations” but all thought the sentiment was important
- Due to the potential for the first-year writing seminar to act as a site for engagement with diversity, instructors should be equipped to deal with the topic regardless of the focus of their class
- Given the student preference for discussions as a means for learning, it is expected that instructors too would benefit from having ongoing forums for discussion to develop best practices