

Pedagogic Practice as a Form of Social Justice: Exploring Conceptions of Engaged Pedagogy Among Florida HBCUs

*Amanda Wilkerson
Marcelo Julio
Marjorie Ceballos
University of Central Florida*

*Kimberly Brown-Pellum
Florida A&M University*

Abstract

First-Year Seminar (FYS) is a retention tool post-secondary institutions utilize to motivate matriculation from the first to second year of college for first-time in college students (FTIC). Yet, very little knowledge has been published about the pedagogic and teaching methods of FYS instructors, particularly at Black colleges and universities who have a history of centering social justice practices holistically. The emphasis of this analysis is to disaggregate the approaches and perceptions of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) FYS academic instructional practitioners. Additionally, this work clarifies the forms in which these academic agents, primarily instructors, leverage tenets of culturally appropriate pedagogy to actualize social justice in their instructional methods. Six participants were interviewed, and data were coded and analyzed. Thus, the researchers contend that HBCU FYS instructors enact a curriculum of instruction that is influenced by culture and the historic heritages of the universities as an articulation of social justice in teaching.

Keywords: First-Year Seminar, HBCUs, social justice, pedagogy

Introduction

First-Year Seminar (FYS) is a post-secondary academic intervention created with the ambition to support collegiate student retention and persistence (Barefoot et al., 1998; Wilkerson, 2016). Traditionally, research on FYS has focused on program structure, academic skill building, and campus resources (Alvarez & Towne, 2016; Padgett & Keup, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The aforementioned empirical works were important, as they promoted arguments that advanced the benefit and need of FYS as an instrument to support the academic success of first-year college students. However, analysis of pedagogical methods best suited for FYS courses to encourage student success, particularly from a social justice and diversity perspective, remain critically under examined. Some studies (Preis & Fenzel, 2003; Chamber & Mahoney, 2008) have considered social justice as an organizing principle of instructional engagement within FYS but only from the viewpoint of service learning. Similarly, researchers have not considered social justice as a pedagogical perspective to analyze teaching and learning in collegiate classes such as FYS. For example, the work of Preis and Fenzel (2003) and Chamber and Mahoney (2008) illustrated the advantages of FYS but did not examine the pedagogical methods of these classes within a social justice context. While seminal research on FYS accounted for understanding the vital role systemized first-year support provided, the popular position of FYS research was constrained. That is, FYS academic works promoted the program without codifying the scope of teaching and learning within a homogenized

racial context (Tillis, 2019) integrating social justice as an analytic tool (Charmaz, 2005).

Social justice as a pedagogical approach has been an idea widely applied in educational research in K–12 and in higher education systems. Within the context of higher education, it has been used to examine student performance and educational leadership activities, among other issues. Several scholars situated their work as frames that emphasized the importance of interconnecting axioms of social justice within higher education (McArthur, 2010; McNair et al., 2020; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Additionally, other researchers analyzed the impacts of social justice on outcomes of student success in higher education (Bensimon, 2007; Bowman & Denson, 2011; Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Related bodies of research focused on transformative instructional classroom practices to promote social justice (Patton et al., 2010). However, while social justice has influenced higher education practices from a holistic perspective, social justice frameworks are rarely linked to the instructional design and instructional practices of FYS. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) provided a space to gain an understanding of social justice in FYSs. From their inception, HBCUs have expressed institutional missions that are unapologetically committed to equity in education (Wiggan, 2015). HBCUs were observed as early vanguards of Black excellence, wherein administered curriculum focused on learning as a tool to tacitly address educational barriers faced by African Americans (Anderson, 1988). Furthermore, in Anderson's (1988) seminal work he acknowledged HBCU curriculum varied among institution type. Today, many HBCUs continue to center their work of educating as a democratizing force for learners (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). Yet, Tillis (2018) argued HBCU FYS instructors still grapple with enacting culturally relevant pedagogic approaches within institutions that historically fostered social justice frameworks to disrupt coercive raced-based marginalization in education (Blackmore, 2009; Palmer et al., 2010).

The Present Study

The present study addresses the social justice perspective by specifically analyzing FYS instructional approaches within the context of undergraduate student development at HBCUs. This paper is the continuation of research on the study of FYS instructional professionals uniquely located at Florida HBCUs as a part of a larger research study on HBCU institutions' pedagogical practices to support student academic success (Wilkerson, 2016). In a slight departure from the aforementioned, the researchers of this study were interested in understanding the instructional approaches of Florida FYS instructors, specifically focusing on which aspects of their teaching approach accounted for social justice teaching informed through the work of hooks's (1994) engaged pedagogy. To frame the current study, two questions were asked. First, what were the teaching approaches of HBCU FYS professionals and how were the teaching practices demonstrated? Secondly, what role did the teaching approach play in braiding together (or not) tenets of engaged pedagogy and social justice? In this paper, we draw on the work of hooks (1994), using engaged pedagogy as a methodological structure, to examine if FYS courses can be dedicated to social justice through the usage of engaged pedagogy. Secondly, we also present themes that emerged during the interviews with six study participants from three different Florida HBCUs. We provide participant perspectives that could inform approaches to facilitate student learning by practicing engaged pedagogy at other post-secondary institutions. Additionally, we suggest that FYS classrooms can be engaged in social justice through engaged pedagogy.

We ground and position the analysis of our exploration with a review of literature that explains the conceptual framework and elaborates on empirical works regarding FYS, HBCUs, and social justice. As a part of the literature review, we contextualized concepts related to hooks's (1994) engaged pedagogy as the theoretical lens from which this study was completed. In the methods section, we describe the interview process, the selection criteria, and how data for the study were analyzed. We follow with an explanation of our findings. Finally, we conclude with implications for practice within FYS courses based on the presented themes.

Conceptual Framework

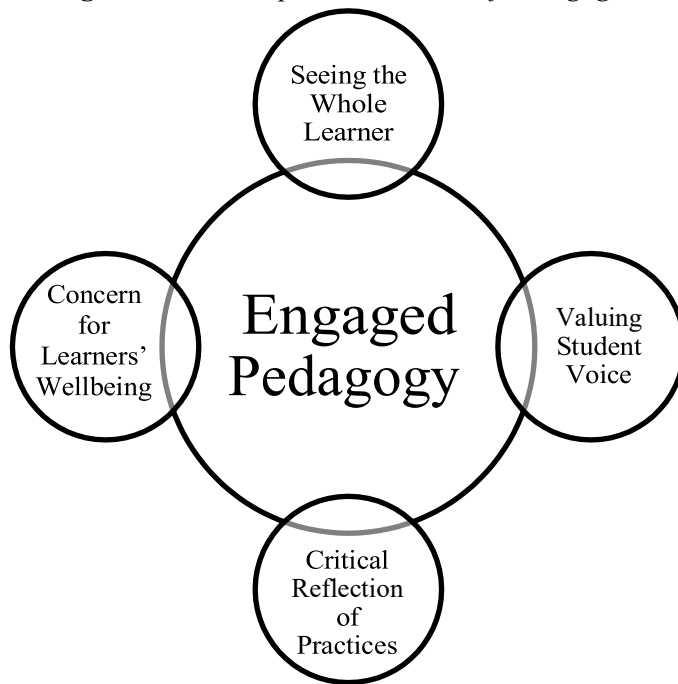
The review of the literature on FYS as an intervention to support student retention and persistence is extensive, and historically it has focused on program structure, academic skill building, and campus resources (Alvarez & Towne, 2016; Padgett & Keup, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reid, 2009). Yet, a focus on the experience of HBCUs and their FYS, the classroom pedagogical practices, and the personal experience of the instructors and professionals who design and teach these courses have not been included within the focus of past studies. Similarly, research on the experiences of FYS professionals, instructors of the course responsible for teaching FYS from the perspective of social justice has seldom been approached in the literature and is often nuanced to experiential learning (Friedman & Alexander, 2007).

The role of instructors as potential agents to raise consciousness in their students and resist the replication of oppressive practices remains to be explored. Social justice in education assumes the educational environment as a prime space for the transmission and replication of the political, social, and economic structure (Sleeter, 2013). Social justice education recognizes that the educational setting can be functional to maintaining inequities and social injustices. However, social justice proposes that it is possible to challenge the status quo but it “requires a moral and ethical attitude toward equality and possibility and a belief in the capacity of people as agents who can act to transform their world” (Bell, 2007, p. 13). It is this perspective that guides this research and the review of the literature on FYS.

Engaged Pedagogy

“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (hooks, 1994, p. 12). Given the nature and process of radical possibility in teaching, we used hooks’s (1994) existing work to conceptually analyze the pedagogical approaches of this study’s participants. Specifically, the work of hooks (1994) is used in this review to reduce the focus from the broader analysis of social justice to the specific pedagogical practices and lived experiences of instructors and professionals who participate in FYS. The foundational ideas encapsulated in hooks’s (1994) engaged pedagogy aid in framing both the research and the space of higher education from a perspective of social justice, particularly of the role of the instructor in the classroom and their relationship with students. hooks (1994) redefined teaching as a performative act and the classroom as a space to represent changes that can enrich the life of the students. Moreover, hooks (1994) viewed the learner as a whole human being and proposed a holistic view of the student that included not only the intellectual dimension but the physical and emotional dimensions. The role of the instructor or teacher is further redefined to include the role of caretaker where the student’s soul is placed at the center to ensure their wellbeing. To perform this role, hooks (1994) emphasized the need for educators to reflect critically about themselves as human beings and as practitioners in a constant process of self-actualization. Lastly, hooks’s (1994) work spoke to the importance of the instructor’s value perception of students, recognizing the student voice as active in the learning process, and instructor capacity to connect the content in the classroom to the real-world experience of students.

We, therefore, leveraged the work described above to highlight and investigate not only the context for what was taught and how the material was taught but also the multiple layers within the contexts of (a) viewing students holistically, (b) concern for student wellbeing, (c) critical self-reflection, and (d) valuing student voice. Figure 1 depicts entities of engaged pedagogy.

Figure 1. *A Conceptual Framework for Engaged Pedagogy*

Note. Adapted from *Teaching to Transgress* by b. hooks, 1994, Routledge.

First-Year Seminar Context

The presence of hooks's (1994) ideas can be found in a wide collection of research based on critical analysis of education. While well established in critical analysis of education, it is an emerging perspective in HBCU educational contexts. A novel focus on FYS in HBCU is found in the work of Tillis (2018, 2019). Tillis's critical analysis of the pedagogical approaches of FYS in HBCUs viewed the curriculum and pedagogies offered to first-year students as part of the conservative integration model. This model, however, did not account for the specifics of underserved students and did not acknowledge their biographies and ways of knowing. Tillis (2018, 2019) argued that the incongruence between curriculum and instructional design as it related to who the students were was not innocuous. As a result, students who participated in developmental courses perceived themselves as ignorant and attributed this self-perception to some innate condition and were less likely to persist in HBCUs (Tillis, 2018, 2019). Ultimately, Tillis (2018, 2019) proposed an intervention to transform FYS in HBCUs, focusing specifically on the curriculum and the pedagogical strategies within and outside the classroom. To achieve this aim, the curriculum must include subjects and topics relevant to what students are experiencing during the first-year in college (Tillis, 2018, 2019). Additionally, following hooks's (1994) engaged pedagogy and recommendations, the curriculum must connect to student life outside campus to new college student experiences, and also allow for critical reflection on student lived experiences. This reflection emerged from the dialogical relationship and reciprocal process of linking learning between the instructor and students (hooks, 1994).

Similarly, hooks's (1994) holistic approach to the student also can be found in the work of Kelty (2018) and her analysis of the FYS. Kelty (2018) focused on the pedagogical aspect of FYS and proposed a pedagogical approach based on radical empathy and interdependence between instructors and students that went beyond the instrumental objective of student retention as a result of student participation in FYS. As in hooks's (1994) engaged pedagogy, Kelty (2018) noted that instructors "had to be willing, no matter what, to commit, care, trust, respect, and learn along with [their] students" (p. 5).

Black Students and Engaged Pedagogy Context

Even though social justice research on FYS and HBCUs is scarce, there is a corpus of social justice literature that has used hooks's (1994) engaged pedagogy in particular to address the lived experience of Black students in institutions of higher education. For instance, Closson et al. (2014) called for a race pedagogy for Black faculty. Race pedagogy must begin with a process of faculty self-actualization (hooks, 1994). This exercise is essentially liberatory and it will allow their students to understand their own views on race and its concomitant impact on society (hooks, 1994). The effects of using social justice (critical) pedagogical approaches in courses where a majority were students of color has been found to increase the students' sense of empowerment and likelihood of graduation. For example, Alemán and Gaytán (2017) confirmed these findings in their research, and uncovered that a race-centered curriculum also could make students struggle with the content in a process they call "resisting decolonization" (p. 141), where students react critically to race pedagogies and shield themselves from discourses that exacerbate their own racial struggles. This student reaction aligns to the findings of Maybee (2011) and Rowe and Malhotra (2013) regarding the reticence of students to recognize and to problematize issues of race when critical race pedagogy is used in the curriculum.

The idea of self-actualization of faculty as a condition for engaged pedagogy as hooks (1994) proposed can also be found in examining teacher candidates in the context of South African higher teacher education programs. Cherrington (2017) proposed a pedagogy of hope for faculty of teacher candidates, which promotes collaboration, participation, and safe spaces for critical dialogue "that are more congruent with an Afrocentric worldview" (p. 72). This contribution represented an effort to contextualize the process of faculty self-actualization to cultural and social spaces where engaged pedagogy is implemented. It became evident that instructors must not only be steeped in engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), but also must develop a consciousness of the cultural and social space that they inhabit to enable their own hope and wellbeing before they can promote and mobilize collective student hope in the classroom. This research regarding personal hope and the relationship with students further underscores the question about the lack of literature in educational critical analysis focusing on the lived experiences of instructors responsible for FYS at HBCUs.

Going beyond the experience of students of color in higher education, both Madge et al. (2009) and Danowitz and Tuitt (2011) offered examples of engaged pedagogy in higher education. Madge et al. (2009) proposed an engaged pedagogy for international students, while Danowitz and Tuitt (2011) offered an example of engaged pedagogy as the basis for curricular change of a doctoral program to incorporate inclusivity and diversity. Researchers reported that the trigger for change was the need to prepare scholars and practitioners to work with students from diverse backgrounds and, in particular, to work with underrepresented populations (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011). The researchers' work makes clear that a new pedagogical approach, such as engaged pedagogy, can only succeed if a diverse curriculum is implemented. As a result of these studies, it may be that HBCU faculty are implementing engaged pedagogy with a diverse curriculum, but there is a dearth of research on this topic within HBCU to know if this is the case.

Because pedagogical approaches and a diverse curriculum are conditions to include students and to engage faculty, it is imperative to understand how both these components are employed at HBCUs within FYS. Curricular content and pedagogical practices, meaning what is learned and how it is taught, have led the agenda of scholars inspired by the social justice framework and by engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). This research contributes to this area of scholarship by building upon the social justice agenda in higher education through an exploration of the lived experiences of the people who lead FYS. Through this study, we aimed to not only voice their lived experiences, but also to expand the knowledge of social justice in education and the role of engaged pedagogy in HBCUs through an examination of these experiences.

Methods

Six participants from various Florida HBCUs generated a series of cases. The researchers of this study bounded those cases for this qualitative case study to further investigate and understand aspects of teaching with regard to instructional practices of HBCU professionals (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2017). Here, the qualitative approach of the case study method was used to analyze teaching practices, strategies, and ideologies as identified by study participants (Lavery, 2003).

Given the exploratory nature of this research, a case study design was implemented as it is a form of empirical investigation with the intention of investigating a confined case. Several researchers noted that case studies can be defined according to factors such as circumstance, instance or individual, narrowed in scope and emphasis that will investigate the context of real life for the contemporary phenomenon (Savin-Baden, 2014; Yin, 2017). The data for this study were derived from an extensive study using a mixed-method approach that generated both survey and interview data on the perceptions and experiences of HBCU FYS professionals conducted by the first author (Wilkerson, 2016). Interview results were isolated from the survey data in this particular work to examine the teaching perspectives and pedagogical ideologies of FYS practitioners. A case study approach was most fitting for this study, as it allowed the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of the ways in which HBCU faculty taught FYS courses to determine if their teaching included elements of social justice pedagogy.

Research Sites

The research sites were Hillman College, Mays College, and Black Ivy University (pseudonyms). The three post-secondary institutions are situated in rural and urban areas within the state of Florida. Of the presented research sites, one is a public Florida State University System institution, while the remaining two are privately-funded colleges or universities. Table 1 lists institutions and provides basic demographic information on each institution. Note that pseudonyms were assigned in place of the institution's name to preserve anonymity.

Table 1. *Study Institutions by Student Enrollment and Type*

Institution Name	Student Enrollment	Institutional Classification
Mays College	500–1,999	Private
Hillman College	2,000–6,999	Private
Black Ivy University	7,000–12,000	Public

Note. Student Enrollment reflects the enrollment range. Source: Wilkerson, 2016, p. 45.

Participants

Participants of the study were selected utilizing purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). Interview data were obtained from participants teaching an FYS course. The participants who comprised the sample for this study held various roles within their home institution (i.e., academic advisor, subject area faculty member, etc.). For the purposes of this paper, participants are referred to as FYS professionals. Similarly, rather than focus on their institutional title, we use FYS professionals to emphasize their work as an FYS instructor, as opposed to other responsibilities they may have had outside of teaching FYS. In total, 23 FYS professionals were contacted and 21 participated in the broader study. However, we concentrate on six of the practitioners who volunteered to discuss their pedagogical approaches. Of the participants, all six self-identified as Black/African American, three self-identified as male and three participants self-identified as female. Study eligibility criteria included two specific points: (a) identified as FYS instructor and (b) teaching FYS within the last five

years at an HBCU. All the participants taught and were current instructors of FYS. Two of the participants taught at the public HBCU institution while the remaining four of the participants taught at the private HBCUs. Table 2 details interview participants' institutions and pseudonyms.

Table 2. *Interview Participants' Names and Institutions*

Name	Institution	Race	Gender	FYS Instructor
Mr. Andrew	Hillman College	Black/ African American	Male	Yes
Dr. Blue	Black Ivy University	Black/ African American	Female	Yes
Ms. Lisa	Mays College	Black/ African American	Female	Yes
Mr. Reginald	Black Ivy University	Black/ African American	Male	Yes
Mr. Rudy	Mays College	Black/ African American	Male	Yes
Ms. Trish	Hillman College	Black/African American	Female	Yes

Data Collection

Again, the qualitative data for this study were part of a larger research project examining FYS at HBCUs. For this study, data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the six FYS professionals at their individual institutional location. Open-ended interview questions were based on Likert-scaled survey answers from participants in the larger research project.

The survey contained questions regarding the structure, purpose, and instructional approach at HBCUs. The survey responses were used to pose questions during one-on-one interviews. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to expand on responses from the survey related to their teaching practices and how they interpreted their teaching method for FYS.

Data Analysis

The primary method of data analysis and evaluation included procedures and strategies informed by Patton (2002). Data were coded to provide an overview of the cases and generate new information about what was learned from the HBCU FYS approach to teaching (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The following steps were carried out in this study to evaluate the results. First, the researchers organized and prepared the data based on the information the participants shared. Then, the researchers reviewed, transcribed, coded, labeled, and categorized the data into specific themes. Finally, the researchers classified categories into patterns and analyzed them to gather a greater significance. The coding methodology was open-ended and aligned in a strength-based approach to humanizing the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Findings

Results from the qualitative analysis of participant interviews revealed 30 open codes, which were then used to construct participant themes. The identified codes pointed to teaching centered on various multifaceted forms of support provided for students within FYS. During the coding process, the focus was unique in that no special analytical consideration was given based on the gender of the participant or the type of HBCU, private or public. The aforementioned coding approach had no deleterious impact on the codes produced as data were examined through the context of hooks's (1994) work on engaged pedagogy. This was done because the primary objective of the research was to uncover overall engaged pedagogical practices, rather than by gender or public or private HBCU. As the coding process was completed, it was evident that the codes generated from the data reflected participant experiences aligned to aspects of engaged pedagogy. Specifically, the data that aligned to engaged pedagogy were value perceptions of the students by the instructor, the recognition of the

student voice as active participants in the learning process, and the instructors' capacity to connect the content in the classroom with student real-world experience (hooks, 1994). Table 3 presents all 30 codes identified during analysis of interview data.

Table 3. *Open Interview Codes (N = 30)*

Qualitative Codes Identified in Interviews		
Love	Support	Motivation
Guidance	Drive	Mentoring
Leadership	Leaders	Self-worth
Gap Bridgers	Persistence	Community
Black	The HBCU Way	Contributions to Culture
Student experiences	Instructor experiences	Shared experiences
Basic study skills	Perseverance	Skill building
Learning from peers	Positive role modeling	Changing realities
Poor	Purpose	Teaching
Serving	Helping	Non-traditional roles

Here the findings are presented from the participants who were engaged in instructional practices. Noted are their spoken purposes associated with teaching FYS. Three exemplary approaches are presented. Such approaches are discussed as they have imperative implications for instructional methods concerning FYS.

HBCU Participant Themes

Further analysis of the qualitative codes led to the emergence of three themes related to engaged pedagogy and culturally relevant instruction propositions: (a) valuing students, (b) fusing academic lectures and historic lessons, and (c) contextualizing calling. In the sections that follow, we examine each of the themes and present vignettes for each. The vignettes are selected to exemplify each theme and to emphasize a component of engaged pedagogy.

Valuing Students

hooks (1994) noted that academic success is a criterion associated with culturally relevant pedagogy. hooks (1994) further explained that educational strategies important to the learner fostered academic excellence. hooks (1994) conceptualized engaged pedagogy as a teaching strategy that adhered to the notion of an ethic of educational respect. That is, one would teach “in a manner that respects and cares for the learner” (p. 13). Within this section, we share examples of valuing students through the lens of the participant’s approach regarding instructional tactics that centers on caring for students. An emergent theme from participants was teaching approaches to valuing students. Of the individuals who were interviewed, all spoke of valuing students through relationships to foster academic achievement. In some instances, participants used required office hours, advising components, and other interactional techniques that fostered students to get to know more about the instructor.

Dr. Blue, for example, built relationships with students by engaging students in interactive 10-minute meeting intervals during office hour blocks. Dr. Blue felt that her teaching was empowering because she focused on getting to know students through office hours. Moreover, Dr. Blue stressed using the discussion in office hours to learn who the students were and parlay that information into her

interactions with them to keep students inspired to meet their academic goals. As Dr. Blue explained, “you can’t teach who you don’t know.” She stated that the meeting component allowed students the opportunity to come in and respond to questions concerning “their selected major, what they wanted to do after college and how was their transition to the city for which the institution was located in.”

The sentiments shared from Dr. Blue highlight how valuing students shaped her course of action related to teaching FYS. In particular, the approach shared by Dr. Blue unrepentantly carved out a space where students were welcomed to share information about themselves. That is, Dr. Blue, did not just do office hours, rather she gave meaning and modeled how the office hours could be used. Furthermore, she was proactive about making connections with students both in and out of the classroom. When Dr. Blue was asked to clarify why meeting with students was important, she expressed that knowledge of the student was a linkage to capture their interest in class.

Ms. Trish, another participant, spoke of building relationships through common academic interests. Ms. Trish noted, “I actively serve as an academic advisor. That is a bonus. Outside of class I have another space to get acquainted with and support my students.” Furthermore, another participant, Ms. Lisa, discussed characteristics of building relationships with students that included “being present, allowing them to get to know you and knowing more about the student than their grades.”

It is important to note that many of the participants authentically, without any prompting, articulated the various ways in which they honored student voice. Here, their focus was both formal, as was the case with Dr. Blue, and informal, in the case of Ms. Trish. A good deal of support can be found in both approaches. Further, as Cherrington (2017) proposed, the convergence of their actions did intimate actions associated pedagogy of hope and collaboration. In terms of hooks’s (1994) engaged pedagogy, specifically looking at valuing student voice, there was an effort to promote honoring the personhood of the students.

Fusing Academic Lectures and Historic Lessons

Among interview participants, a statement was continuously reiterated. In response to the questions related to types of lessons taught and how these lessons were taught to bring into focus tenets uniquely associated with FYS curriculum, the participants referred to teaching FYS “the HBCU way.” The participant responses suggested that while they planned and enacted lessons connected to instructing their students about campus resources, emphasizing the importance of seeking support, and progressing toward degree completion, they also used FYS as a way to imbue students with the history and role of the HBCU. hooks (1994) refers to this approach to teaching as interjecting elements of life experiences, through concern for the learner’s wellbeing, into the curriculum as a matter of resistance to the status quo. Within the stories of teaching was a consistent articulation of a dynamic relationship between pedagogy and school charisma. Below is a reflection of Dr. Blue’s thoughts:

I love that we open the doors of access to students. But once the first door of access is open, I am worrying about how to get them through the next door of graduation, the door of success beyond college. Success can’t stop for our students with wearing a cap and gown. They become examples of success for their communities. That looks different and is more complex than just a regular class. I was excited for Obama, but he was the first. He is not the only. At my HBCU we have a record of building Black leaders. In my class, we learn about how to register for a course, how to study. We also learn about all of the leaders who graduated from this great institution.

Participants confirmed that their instructional approaches employed techniques where the subject matter was presented within the context of the student learning environment. Yet, the participants also subtly revealed ways for which they showed concern for the learner. Such a dynamic included having a seriousness about what the students learned in class. Additionally, the dynamic also encompassed

how learners could integrate their learning through the lens of leadership. As Blue denoted, the prototype for her student's success was supporting the students on a wider scale beyond the classroom. At the same time, other participants included points that shared similar sentiments.

Mr. Rudy reported, "I do not exclude the school's history from class, we are like McDonald's, it's Black history 365." For Mr. Rudy, his FYS instruction was grounded in cultural upliftment. This was particularly true at Mays College, which is located in the urban core of a large metropolitan city. Many of the students admitted to the college have no more than a 2.5 GPA (Wilkerson, 2016). However, the comments by Mr. Rudy and others, highlighted a presence of pride and high expectations for all students. As Mr. Rudy stated, "my students are not defined by where they come from, they are defined by how I help them." Mr. Reginald's comments conceptualized the points articulated by Mr. Rudy. Mr. Reginald viewed FYS as a way to share with students, "how to manage the first-year, and how to be a real rooster, [pseudonym for college mascot]—in my class we do both." The various descriptions of the participant teaching practices explained that teaching FYS gave instructors the capacity to connect students with traditional material often associated with FYS curriculum, while at the same time inculcating recipients of the lectures into the nature of the Black college experience.

As FYS professionals, the shared stories of the participants indicated attempts to view the student holistically. hooks (1994) exposed that learners should be viewed in a multidimensional manner accounting for their intellectual, physical, and emotional dimensions. Relatedly, the participants' comments indicated how they grappled with focusing on two aspects, emotionally and intellectually, of supporting the student's wellbeing and alternating between seeing the student holistically.

Contextualizing the Calling

The final consideration of hooks's (1994) engaged pedagogy was establishing trust, redistributing power, and reflection on practices. As the participants spoke about their instruction, and ways for which they built relationships with students in the course, they also explained practices rooted in building trust and evaluating their approaches. This approach addressed the combination of engaged pedagogy and social justice as suggested by hooks. Many of the participants discussed knowledge of student out-of-classroom experiences. Primarily, out-of-classroom experiences related to adjusting to collegiate life. Additionally, participants professed to understand how those experiences situated the epistemology of the students. Ms. Lisa surmised:

I focus on academics. When I say academics, I mean grading and correcting papers, helping with strengthening their presentation, building their confidence. However, I get other students to help with the social side of college. I am contributing to help the students to adjust from a high school mentality to a college mentality. I am getting them in the habit of seeing me as an academic advocate.

As the participant explained, the promotion of academics was critical for the first-year classroom setting. Nevertheless, the traditional instructor role was enhanced through peer-to-peer interaction. Throughout the interviews, participants explained that classroom environments were safe spaces to share power with students to enhance their knowledge. Ms. Lisa stated, "we help each other, I tell them the truth about what I know or don't know." The remarks from the participants indicated different types of support balanced between the instructor and student to facilitate college adjustment. Additionally, support was offered directly in the classroom as a part of the practices utilized in teaching.

Throughout the interviews, the participants further clarified the ways in which teaching FYS connected to a greater purpose. Through their out-of-classroom interactions with students, participants were able to interact with students in a humanistic manner, utilizing measures such as love, belief, and building confidence. Mr. Andrew shared:

I had one who had come from jail and he really just want[ed] to make it. He told me, “I messed up, but I want to never go back from where I just came from.” But then he says he has to work and has to come to class, so he was telling me he has to choose one of the two. His dilemma is he doesn’t know how he can choose an education and leave his job. That’s a tough one. But I talked with him and tried to make him see that there is a way. There is a way. Did I have an answer for him? My job is to build confidence. I tell you why. When they are confident, I can tell you they do well. Stuff I was thinking to myself like how will they make it out of that? If they have a plan and they act bold about it, I see them succeed.

Participants understood that class time or matters related to non-curricular concerns were not the only time to provide students with learning support or to hear concerns. Similarly, embedded in their interaction with students were examples of unusual care beyond those expected from instructors. Participants used the interactions to forge connections with students. Overall, instructors were finding ways to describe their work and were not afraid to admit that giving love is a part of that description. As Dr. Blue noted:

We [are] about [to] build from who they are. I will tell you this and at a Black school you need to do this; I give my students love...I would say at an HBCU, generally, but especially here, the professionals have to give a certain part of themselves. Forget clocking into work. You do not have a nine to five at an HBCU; you have a calling.

Dr. Blue’s perception of her actions was interconnected with the other participants. In thinking through their practices, they acknowledged that the course explicit goals were to support student persistence. Yet, the central point of their reflections centered on providing their students with distinct support that was subconsciously influenced by love for their students. Additionally, it explains the key to unlocking this form of support was powered by coded language that implied empathy (Kelty, 2018).

Discussion

We discussed three themes from participants in the previous section about their approach to teaching. Here, we present the discussion of the findings in relation to the literature and also consider the theoretical and practical implications regarding FYS instruction. First, while the work of HBCU FYS was rooted in the social missions of their institutions and sustained by the cultural histories of the schools, the approach of FYS professionals was one that sought to enact instructional practices that were educationally empowering. As a result, the participants’ descriptions of their course were rooted in both academic and empowerment instruction.

Moreover, cultural upliftment seemed to be a central tenet of instruction. The FYS professionals situated their work as a tool to examine how cultural upliftment might exercise meaning beyond class or the collegiate experience. This finding from the participants included inherent contradiction from the research previously presented. For instance, Tillis (2018, 2019) argued that the model of FYS at HBCUs failed to account for teaching practices that centered the needs of the students nor did the model acknowledge the lived experiences of students, which minimized the transformative power of such a course. In contrast, the themes revealed in this study suggest that an explicit focus was placed on valuing the students and building the capacity of the student. Furthermore, the belief of the FYS professionals was that their mindset, attitude, and actions were guided by a deep level of commitment that would ensure student success.

However, the explanation of articulated approaches seemed uninformed by any specific pedagogical training. According to many of the participants their approach was regulated by doing things the “HBCU way” or more altruistically through a force that they described as a calling. These findings suggest there might be room to better prepare FYS instructors to normalize their pedagogical inclinations through faculty development centered on engaged pedagogy. hooks’s (1994) work

explicitly details practices that can lead to further engagement in the classroom between learner and lecture. In our view, while the study participants did boast practices that were interconnected with tenets of engaged pedagogy, the interview data would suggest that such attempts, “the HBCU way,” were intentional and reflected an acknowledgment of “how” the participants infused Afrocentric culture into the course. Thus, we argue that the explicit inclusion of engaged pedagogy as a teaching practice suitable for FYS can be utilized to formally enact social justice in a course created to build insight for student academic success.

We further advance the notion that engaged pedagogy be a systematic instructional strategy. As hooks (1994) argued, the utility of engaged pedagogy is its binary implications for reflective and reflexive teaching. Although there is potential benefit in the ability of FYS professionals to transverse teaching deeply rooted in the capacity of instructors to engage with students in a transformational manner, this study has its limitations. The findings from this study are exploratory. We believe that a richer understanding of the theoretical framework and HBCU FYS professionals can be further examined to support the level of meaning extrapolated from the participants of this study. Research on FYS at HBCUs is limited; therefore, further research is needed that incorporates hooks’s (1994) work, focusing on how it is, or is not, embedded in other FYS courses at HBCUs and on other campuses that support minority student populations.

Conclusion

Within this study we embarked upon understanding the pedagogical approaches of HBCU FYS professionals. Moreover, we wanted to understand how participant perspectives informed their instruction and whether or not those instructional practices were connected to tenets of social justice as expressed through engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). The timing of this line of inquiry is critically important in higher education, particularly as instruction has shifted to a remote learning environment with its own set of challenges as a result of a worldwide pandemic. Future research will need not only to explore these themes further in HBCU settings, but also to determine how these themes may evolve due to a remote learning context. As educators, we need to and must emphasize a committed approach to teaching and learning that emphasizes teaching practices that value student voice, serve the whole learner, allow higher education practitioners to reflect critically on teaching approaches, and allow higher education practitioners to examine the interconnectedness of instruction and support that provide for the wellbeing of students. We, therefore, hope that educators will continue to explore, from an engaged pedagogy perspective, the various ways in which a shared pedagogical approach can be used to advance social justice in FYS courses.

References

Corresponding Author: Amanda Wilkerson

Author Contact Information: Amanda.Wilkerson@ucf.edu

- Alemán, S. M., & Gaytán, S. (2017). 'It doesn't speak to me': Understanding student of color resistance to critical race pedagogy. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(2), 128–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1242801>
- Alvarez, R. R., & Towne, V. S. (2016). Academic advisors as adult educators: First-year experience instructors. *Journal of Adult Education*, 45(1), 10–15. <https://search.proquest.com/openview/86e61dd13a927ca85b55832fec99604b/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=28962>
- Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Barefoot, B. O., Warnock, C. L., Dickinson, M. P., Richardson, S. E., & Roberts, M. R. (1998). *Exploring the evidence: Reporting outcomes of first-year seminars. The first-year experience*. (Vol. II, Monograph Series, Number 25). National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, Columbia, SC.
- Bell, L. A. (2007). Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In L. A. Bell, M. Adams, & Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (pp. 1–14). Routledge.
- Bensimon, E. M. (2007). The underestimated significance of practitioner knowledge in the scholarship on student success. *The Review of Higher Education*, 30(4), 441–469. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2007.0032>
- Blackmore, J. (2009). Leadership for social justice: A transnational dialogue. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 4(1), 1–10.
- Bowman, N. A., & Denson, N. (2011). The integral role of emotion in interracial interactions and college student outcomes. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 4(4), 223. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024692>
- Brennan, J., & Naidoo, R. (2008). Higher education and the achievement (and/or prevention) of equity and social justice. *Higher Education*, 56(3), 287–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9127-3>
- Charmaz, K. (2005). Grounded theory in the 21st century: A qualitative method for advancing social justice research. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3, 507–535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416657105>
- Cherrington, A. (2017). Positioning a practice of hope in South African teacher education programmes. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 6(1), 72–86. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2017/v6i1a6>
- Closson, R. B., Bowman, L., & Merriweather, L. R. (2014). Toward a race pedagogy for Black faculty. *Adult Learning*, 25(3), 82–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159514534192>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Danowitz, M. A., & Tuitt, F. (2011). Enacting inclusivity through engaged pedagogy: A higher education perspective. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(1), 40–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2011.539474>

- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American journal of theoretical and applied statistics*, 5(1), 1–4.
- Friedman, D., & Alexander, J. (2007). Investigating a first-year seminar as an anchor course in learning communities. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 19(1), 63–74.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.
- Kelty, S. M. (2018). We have lift-off: The pedagogy of radical empathy for first-year student success. *The Online Journal of the Practice/Production Symposium of the Mid America Theatre Conference*. (Vol. 7).
- Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(3), 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F160940690300200303>
- Madge, C., Raghuram, P., & Noxolo, P. (2009). Engaged pedagogy and responsibility: A postcolonial analysis of international students. *Geoforum*, 40(1), 34–45.
- Maybee, J. E. (2011). Audience matters: Teaching issues of race and racism for a predominantly minority student body. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43(8), 853–873.
- McArthur, J. (2010). Achieving social justice within and through higher education: The challenge for critical pedagogy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(5), 493–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.49190>
- McNair, T. B., Bensimon, E., & Malcom-Piqueux, L. (2020). *From equity talk to equity walk: Expanding practitioner knowledge for racial justice in higher education*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Nichols, A. H., & Evans-Bell, D. (2017). *A look at Black student success: Identifying top-and bottom-performing institutions*. The Education Trust.
- Padgett, R. D., & Keup, J. R. (2011). *2009 national survey of first-year seminars: Ongoing efforts to support students in transition*. National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. University of South Carolina. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED559002>
- Palmer, R. T., Davis, R. J., & Maramba, D. C. (2010). Role of an HBCU in supporting academic success for underprepared Black males. *Negro Education Review*, 61 (1–4), 85.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. (Vol. 2). Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, L. D., Shahjahan, R. A., & Osei-Kofi, N. (2010). Introduction to the emergent approaches to diversity and social justice in higher education special issue. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 43(3), 265–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2010.496692>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative social work*, 1(3), 261–283.
- Preis, J., & Fenzel, L. M. (2003). Service-learning in the First-Year Seminar: Providing reciprocal benefits and enhancing connections. *Proceedings of the American Educational Research Association*. Institute of Education Sciences. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED477442.pdf>

- Reid, K. R. M. (2009). *A multiple case study of college first-year seminars* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Nevada.
- Rowe, A. C., & Malhotra, S. (2013). Still the silence: Feminist reflections at the edges of sound. In *Silence, Feminism, Power* (pp. 1–22). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Saldaña, J., & Omasta, M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life*. SAGE Publications.
- Savin-Baden, M. (2014). Using problem-based learning: New constellations for the 21st century. *The Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 25(3&4), 197–219.
- Schamber, J. F., & Mahoney, S. L. (2008). The development of political awareness and social justice citizenship through community-based learning in a first-year general education seminar. *The Journal of General Education*, 75–99.
- Sleeter, C. (2013). *Power, teaching, and teacher education: Confronting injustice with critical research and action*. Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers.
- Tillis, G. E. (2018). Antiracism, Black suffering, and the future of first-year seminars at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 87(3), 311–325. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7709/jnegroeducation.87.3.0311>
- Tillis, G. E. (2019). Toward a transformative transition: A critical pedagogical approach to social-psychological interventions in first-year seminar. In J. Hoffman, P. Blessinger, & M. Makhanya (Eds.), *Strategies for fostering inclusive classrooms in higher education: International perspectives on equity and inclusion* (Vol. 16, pp. 183–195). Emerald.
- Wiggin, G. (2015). *Last of the black titans*. Sense. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-322-3_1
- Wilkerson, A. (2016). *Access and student success: An examination of the perceptions and experiences of first-year seminar professionals at Florida Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Central Florida.
- Wilson-Strydom, M. (2015). University access and theories of social justice: Contributions of the capabilities approach. *Higher Education*, 69(1), 143–155. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9766-5>
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Designs and methods*. SAGE Publications.