Promoting Access & Critical Literacy: Working Within, Beyond, and Against the Academy

Cover Page Footnote
We would like to thank the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 Editorial Board and reviewers of JCSHESA for making this Special Issue possible.

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Abstract

There is a common trope in academia that the purpose of research is to give a voice to the voiceless. However, as critical scholars, we recognize that this viewpoint perpetuates a deficit lens and ignores and/or minimizes the agency that individuals already hold. So when the 2019–2020 Editorial Board was deciding on a theme for the Journal’s next Special Issue, rather than thinking of any person as “voiceless,” we knew we wanted to instead, “pass the mic” to amplify voices and perspectives that are not always centered in academia. Promoting Access and Critical Literacy is a function of our values as the *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs* (JCSHESA). Throughout every aspect of the publication process, we center practices of care and wholeness, while also pushing authors and each other to think more critically about how our scholarship can be more collaborative and applicable to the communities we serve. With this Special Issue, we chose to highlight critical literacy as a tool for meaning-making, and as a lens to examine and expose systems of oppression. Critical literacy, and this Special Issue, serves to remind the reader that folks who may not ascribe to the identity of “critical scholar” nor have access to the academy, still maintain important critical perspectives.
Editors’ Welcome

Sydney Marie Simone Curtis & Dianey Reyna Leal

There is a common trope in academia that the purpose of research is to give a voice to the voiceless (e.g., Dotson, 2012). However, as critical scholars, we recognize that this viewpoint perpetuates a deficit lens and ignores and/or minimizes the agency that individuals already hold. So when the 2019–2020 Editorial Board was deciding on a theme for the Journal’s next Special Issue, rather than thinking of any person as “voiceless,” we knew we wanted to instead, “pass the mic” to amplify voices and perspectives that are not always centered in academia. Promoting Access and Critical Literacy is a function of our values as the Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs (JCSHESA). Throughout every aspect of the publication process, we center practices of care and wholeness, while also pushing authors and each other to think more critically about how our scholarship can be more collaborative and applicable to the communities we serve. With this Special Issue, we chose to highlight critical literacy as a tool for meaning-making, and as a lens to examine and expose systems of oppression. Critical literacy, and this Special Issue, serves to remind the reader that folks who may not ascribe to the identity of “critical scholar” nor have access to the academy, still maintain important critical perspectives.

As a student-run, open-access journal, we work within, beyond, and against the academy to continuously interrogate the ways that knowledge is produced, written, and distributed. We do all this while developing our own scholarly voices and unlearning hegemonic practices that push us into cycles of burnout and further complicity with the inequitable standards of higher education. This year has been no exception.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit when JCSHESA was in the middle of reviewing manuscripts for this Special Issue. As a student-run journal, we knew that prioritizing the well-being of authors, peer reviewers, readers, and our Editorial Board members would be critical. Taking into account the personal, economic, and social damages the pandemic had brought upon our communities, we employed critical literacy as a reflective tool to help us (re)examine our values, beliefs, and goals as a journal. We knew we could not continue to operate “business as usual” and instead leaned on our journal’s ethic of care and practice to lead with kindness, care, and empathy. Although we continued to operate during this time—reading and reviewing Special Issue manuscripts—we did so as humanely as possible. We first checked-in with our Editorial Board members and our peer reviewers, acknowledging the difficult circumstances we were in and creating space for them to step back if needed. We committed to being as flexible as possible with our Special Issue timeline and momentarily stopped reviewing
new submissions to alleviate the workload of our Editorial Board and peer reviewers. We drafted a statement of solidarity and care and created space for others in the Editorial Board to take on leadership positions if it was within their capacity to do so.

In the summer, in the midst of the pandemic, as we continued working on the Special Issue, our nation faced another pandemic. The unjust killings of Black people—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Oluwatoyin Salau, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Riah Milton, Mercy Mack, and countless others—spurred widespread protests and demonstrations across the country. Once again, we knew that we had to prioritize the well-being of our community members and ourselves. As Women of Color in graduate school, we resisted performative “activism” and instead took time to reflect on the ways that systemic racism and police brutality were impacting our lives and livelihood. Associate Editors extended peer reviewer timelines, and instead of drafting a statement denouncing policy brutality, we took time to cope with our feelings, understanding that our pain and the pain of our communities were legitimate. Aligned with our Special Issue’s theme of critical literacy, our practices and reflections during these past eight months have solidified our efforts to continuously and actively interrogate our ways of producing knowledge—always with an understanding that experience is contextually embedded in systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

This Special Issue is intended for student affairs and higher education scholar-practitioners, graduate students, and members of the community at-large. It offers readers several examples of how critical literacy can be used as both a tool and a lens for research, reflection, and interrogation, particularly beyond the social structures of the academy.

Rooted in the understanding that knowledge is created in community (Madison, 2019), every article in this Special Issue was collaboratively written. The Special Issue begins with a Black feminist autoethnography by a team of seven Black women graduate students who examine and interrogate power, privilege, and oppression in the academy. Interwoven with words and lyrics from iconic Black women artists, these authors give insight into the unique ways they overcome institutional barriers along their educational journeys. This piece is followed by a co-authored article that examines the importance of race and racism in community–university relationships and partnerships. Specifically, the authors expose the tensions that arise as the interests of a large, urban university conflict with those of a neighboring Black community. The reader is then invited into the world of five Women of Color (WoC) doctoral students as they collectively reflect on and deepen their understanding of WoC feminism.
Using collaborative autoethnography, they (re)negotiate and (re)envision the scholarly knowledge of feminism to validate and elevate their own lived experiences as WoC graduate students in the academy. Next, a mother-daughter co-authored piece explores the material realities attached to the policing of knowledge along the U.S.–Mexico border. Through the use of pláticas and reflections, the co-authors examine systems of oppression that seek to silence People and Immigrants of Color in academic spaces and beyond. After that, faculty members at a large, public, land-grant institution interrogate diversity rhetoric on campus. Using a critical literacy framework, these authors highlight how diversity discourses can perpetuate inequity and injustices in the academy.

Next the reader is invited to consider the relationship between critical literacy and student affairs from the perspective of a student affairs professional and an English professor whose work involves literacy practices in classrooms, online spaces, and local communities. Together, these authors challenge readers to consider not only how literacy relates to students affairs, but also how it impacts K–12 education. Finally, in a conceptual paper, the reader is invited to explore how critical literacy and Critical Race Theory can be applied to deconstruct and reinterpret the standards of practice for Chief Diversity Officers (CDO). The authors provide examples of how CDO standards of professional practices can be adapted to reflect the ignored realities of marginalized and minoritized communities in the academy. Altogether, this Special Issue highlights the importance of centering and amplifying voices and perspectives that are not always privileged in academia. In “passing the mic,” we hope that other ways of knowing continue to be uplifted, honored, and celebrated within and beyond academic spaces.

We offer our sincere appreciation to the JCSHESA Editorial Board and reviewers for all of their hard work to make this Special Issue possible. Special thanks to Stephanie Aguilar-Smith and Patrick Hale for their copy editing and layout editing, respectively. And finally, thank you to our readers for continuing to engage with JCSHESA and translating critical scholarship into social change in the field of higher education and student affairs.

References