

ACCESS DENIED: DIGITAL JIM CROW AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO OPEN ACCESS

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This transdisciplinary session features a half day interactive, multimodal, multimedia workshop created to expand conversations on language policy to include institutional barriers denying linguistically diverse students access to open source technology, and provide workshop participants with innovative, creative, cutting-edge activities to access to open source, open code, and other new media technology.

Session overview

The 2014 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication coincides with the 40th anniversary of the landmark Students Right to Their Own Language Resolution (1974). Forged in the political backdrop of the civil rights, Black power, and other liberation movements world wide, SRTOL provided “open access” for racially and linguistically oppressed groups nearly a half-century before the lexicon of “open source” philosophy was created. SRTOL has served as a cornerstone of some of the most critical language policy moments, from the creation of the National Language Policy (1988), the 1977 Ann Arbor “Black English” Case, the 1996 Oakland Ebonics Resolution and various movements against “English First”

or the “English Only” movements that would limit access to bilingual education.

Today, the pedagogical and political objectives open source philosophy and open access technology have been widely celebrated for eliminating the racial “digital divide” through open access, open code, and other user-friendly technologies. Such platforms dissolve traditional linguistic barriers that have historically limited access to literacy and the public sphere.

Remarkably, despite pervasive egalitarian, democratic rhetoric surrounding open source philosophy, yet widely unacknowledged institutional barriers limit – and in some cases, outright deny -- linguistically and racially diverse student populations access to new media technologies. In particular, corporate technology industries target historically-underfunded Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) for installation of proprietary software that deny student access to open source software (OSS) such as MS Office Suite, Mozilla Firefox, free audio capturing software such as Audacity, 3-D software imaging, and various gaming software like Portal and SIMS useful for teaching digital rhetoric. Such virtual firewalls erect new yet invisible linguistic and racial barriers that deny instead of expand access to the “new literacies” of the 21st century.

Furthermore, for students possessing linguistic identifiers such as the Black American Sign Language Community, the consequences of denied access are much higher. While recent scholarship has highlighted the role that African American Language (AAL) constitutes in Black ASL, as a distinct linguistic community, close captioning technologies – based on White American Sign Language – often misrepresent or simply fail to reflect Black ASL meaning and expression. This combination of institutional barriers to access and symbolic misrepresentation constitutes a kind of digital Jim Crow – a virtual “separate and unequal” system of access and denial based on linguistic and racial difference.

The purpose of this workshop is to engage and explore solutions for overcoming the Digital Jim Crow: a virtual “separate but unequal” system of access and denial based on linguistic and racial difference.

The workshop will begin with a brief overview of its purpose and activities, followed by two group facilitated 75-minute interactive sessions. We will provide a 10-minute break between sessions as well as a 30-minute wrap-up to conclude the workshop. Sessions will provide workshop participants with handouts and teaching resources. The first portion will review recent scholarship on AAL and Black ASL and its implications for teaching and practicing writing with participants. This review will make use of multimedia such as PowerPoint, sound recordings, and film. In addition, workshop participants will use personal laptop computers to access websites that allow varying degrees of entry based on institutional affiliation, region, and other variables. Group facilitators will help participants engage major concepts presented in the session, as well as offer guidelines for constructive feedback, classroom activities, and writing assignments. Participants will engage in hands-on composing exercises using graphic design invention strategies and digital and analog production tools to create a typography/letterform project that visually communicates intended cultural associations.

The session will conclude with a 30-minute wrap-up session. Participants will be provided handouts and teaching resources.