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Writing Center Tutoring Philosophy

Throughout my time in the Tutoring Writing: Theory and Practice course, I have engaged with a plethora of different ideas regarding the nature of writing, tutoring, and the writing center itself. In my own brief experiences as a tutor intern, I have also seen and implemented these ideas in a number of experimental ways. Sorting out my position on these theoretical ideas and relating them to the way in which I hope to practice tutoring in the future is a crucial next step in my development as a writing center tutor. Thus, the following tutoring philosophy will seek to establish my understanding of the writing center and writing as it relates to tutoring, connect it to the practice I hope to do, and relate those values to the practice I have already done, all to create a more complete understanding of everything that influences my tutoring in the writing center.

As an institution, I see the writing center holding different, sometimes even opposing, values to different groups. A student, for instance, may view the writing center simply as a resource they can rely on for reassurance and guidance on their writing. However, the value of the writing center to a student goes further, offering a space for them as writers to bring their whole selves to the table, including any identities, anxieties, and past writing experiences, all without fear of judgment or shame. It is a place that does not see the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ writing, but moves towards idiosyncrasies with curiosity. And, with collaboration at the forefront, the writing center holds value to the student by providing them agency in their learning. This collaboration and agency runs counter to the common narrative of academic

instruction, hence why I believe there is irony in the university's endorsement of a writing center. While the university's goal of creating better writers is fulfilled in the writing center, the way this is done is through pushing traditional boundaries, setting aside individualistic values, and challenging the student-teacher hierarchy that is so pervasive in all levels of education in this country. Lunsford's proposition of a deeply collaborative writing center (what she dubs a "Burkean Parlor") is met with these same concerns: a space that "*demands* collaboration" and "engages everyone fairly equally" must necessarily "reject traditional hierarchies", which "poses a threat to the status quo in higher education" (Lunsford). And while it is often difficult to run in opposition to the status quo, especially that of the institution that is endorsing writing center activity, I agree with Lunsford that it is an essential part of the writing center and its value to those it is primarily there to serve: the student body. Without the radical use of peer collaboration and acceptance of linguistic differences, the writing center would lose its loyalty to the students who seek its refuge and provide a service that rejects the most effective forms of tutoring writing.

The writing center should, in fact, be guided by collaboration at its very core. This collaboration should stem from Bruffee's ideas surrounding how knowledge comes about: knowledge is "a made thing, an artifact" that is "generated by communities of knowledgeable peers" (Bruffee 90). Bruffee's idea of knowledge as a "social artifact" is very valuable to the creation of a writing center whose goal is to generate knowledge between two peers of equal status. If knowledge is as he claims it to be, then a collaborative writing center holds more value to the student than a center that perpetuates the teacher-student hierarchy and locks 'knowledge' behind the teacher figure. Regardless of individual expertise, conversation between two peers can result in mastery, as the two "pool their resources" together to create the knowledge of a given discourse (94). To this end, I also believe that the writing center should be guided by

peer-to-peer relationships, with the tutor's loyalty ultimately to the student tutee rather than the university that employs them. This principle is essential to maintaining an environment where students feel comfortable with the vulnerability that is inherent to the writing process. This comes with another loyalty as well: loyalty to the tutee's agency within their writing rather than one's loyalty to the institutional idea of a "standard English". This "standard language ideology" threatens diverse writing in academic settings, and as Blazer and Fallon explain, the key to dismantling this ideology is to have "discussions of lexical choices [with the tutee] such that their agency is highlighted", regardless of whether or not the tutor themselves sees a choice as 'nonstandard' (12). This offering of choice is crucial to creating a safe and unbiased writing center. Unfortunately, this approach will often require tutors to acknowledge the deeply rooted "standard language ideology" to give the writer the necessary knowledge to choose between freedom and conformity to the 'standard' for their grade's sake. However, the offering of this choice is a necessity in empowering the diverse voices of the students that the writing center is designed to serve. Principles of collaboration, peer relationships, loyalty, and an offering of choices that push against the 'standard' should be the guiding forces of writing center operation.

As for my understanding of writing itself, I believe that one learns to write as a reaction to the needs present in their lives and their writing becomes a unique byproduct of their individual experiences; one's writing is affected by the sociocultural forces that influence them as well as the many intersectional parts of their identity. Brandt gives an illustration of the many forces at play in our learning to write in a piece that is aptly named *Accumulating Literacy*, where she explores two case studies to demonstrate the way literacy was accumulated by two different individuals at around the same time. The stories of Sam May and Charles Randolph offer insight into the distinct needs that produce the desire for literacy (May's desire for upward

mobility and military responsibilities versus Randolph's religious obligations and collegiate studies) as well as the unique experiences each would go on to have with writing (like Randolph's father's influences on his writing process). I believe that each person who engages with literacy has a story of need and unique experiences that define the way in which they write and view their writing. These two in-depth examples set the basis for my understanding of the various social and internal forces that underlie each of our individual journeys with writing. As for my own experiences with writing, I described in my writing autoethnography for this course that writing has become a way in which I "personally and intimately navigate my experiences in the world" and "discover new parts of myself," thus developing a clearer sense of my identity as I write (Fisk 1). So not only is my writing influenced by my identity, but it also expresses my identity and further develops my identity simultaneously. This showed me that one's writing and identity are inseparable: to engage with writing is to encounter the identity of the writer.

However, there are times when external expectations impact how we write, and one must balance their own self-expression with the situational forces at play. For instance, when preparing written work for a certain discipline, one must take into consideration the expectations required for acceptance into that discipline's discourse. As Devitt points out, this also applies to the genre one writes in. Genre is often seen as "a normalizing and static concept, a set of forms that constrain the individual" and create tension between expectations and self-expression (Devitt 574). To address this, Devitt puts forth a reconception of genre whose constraints are socially constructed, claiming that generic conventions can and should be broken so long as one's writing still accounts for their situation, which I agree with. Regardless of expectations, we as tutors should emphasize the author's agency to break away from these genre norms. This view helps develop an understanding of writing as accumulated by external experiences and shaped by

social expectations yet ultimately as an expression of one's intersectional identity, and this opens up my view of writing as it pertains to my tutoring. It creates an emphasis on a writer's agency, an awareness of the choices they must make, and the situational influences of a written work.

Both my conception of the writing center and understanding of writing itself contribute to the ways I approach my tutoring. My understanding of the writing center as being driven by collaboration and a Bruffian sense of knowledge creation fuels my conversational approach to tutoring, which in turn acts as the core of my beliefs regarding many aspects of peer tutoring at large. This is especially true when it comes to questions concerning the navigation of power and expertise within a session. A successful conversation-centered tutoring session necessitates the negotiation of an equal partnership between the tutor and tutee regardless of any present imbalance in expertise. Contrary to Trimbur's beliefs, this imbalance can be negotiated without needing to sacrifice the role of a tutor. While Trimbur's dichotomy between the terms 'peer' and 'tutor' makes sense in theory, it relies on a view of the most extreme version of these terms. More realistically, one can be a peer and a tutor simultaneously, harmonizing their student status with their expertise, as Moore expresses in her revision of Trimbur's dichotomy. In recalling an experience working with a knowledgeable peer, she emphasizes the fact that, "we were simply having a conversation in which both sides contributed equally; neither assumed power over the other when sharing new information" (Moore 2). Peer tutoring can occur in this very same fashion when viewed as "a conversation with an informed and invested professional friend" (3). I believe this view of the role of a tutor as a professional friend allows for a more dynamic role than that of Trimbur's "co-learner" (Trimbur 23) by giving the tutor permission to hold both a level of expertise *and* equality of status. Without the tutor's own expertise, they would actually have less to contribute to the equal partnership, since more often than not, the tutee will be

providing the expertise regarding the subject matter of their written work. When combined with the view that "knowledge can be created through collaboration between two people who share power" (Moore 4), this approach to navigating expertise allows both the role of peer and tutor to operate together within a session while still granting full ownership of the work to the writer.

I experienced this negotiation of power and expertise firsthand in my first ever tutoring session, and it set the tone for how I now approach tutoring across wide knowledge gaps. The writing brought in by my tutee was for a political science class, a field I have no knowledge nor interest in at all. Due to my readings and observed sessions, however, this did not concern me too much, and just as I had expected, we were able to navigate this imbalance through conversation. I asked broad questions about the writing and topic at first, informed by my own expertise in tutoring and general writing, and as the session progressed, I began to feel confident in asking more specific questions tailored to their topic as they continued providing me with knowledge regarding their area of expertise. This led to a productive brainstorming session despite the differences present in knowledge and expertise. We were able to contribute to the shared creation of knowledge without there being a struggle for power. As my first ever session, this served to confirm what I had theorized regarding the function of collaboration, expertise, and power in the writing center, and continues to inform the ways I interact with expertise in sessions.

My theory of writing also emphasizes the importance of considering the student's identity and emotions while tutoring. When someone enters the writing center, they are bringing their whole selves, including all of the factors that impact their identity, both past and present. That is what Denny et al. captures by proposing that writing centers do not exist in the vacuum some often think they do. In their words, "writing centers are never safe harbors or neutral zones," but rather, they exist in the social context surrounding them and are constantly permeated by the

various identities that enter their walls (Denny et al. 4-5). I find these external factors very important to remain aware of when tutoring writing. Writing, after all, is a rather intimate process, and depending on the written work presented in a session, all kinds of self-revelations are required. Understanding the various forces that impact one's identity allow us as tutors to offer a welcoming environment for the tutee to feel safe bringing whatever aspects of their identities they deem necessary. This type of vulnerability often involves an emotional response from the tutee, and I believe it is our role as tutors to accommodate these emotions. Driscoll & Wells have done important work in exploring the role of emotions in the writing center, much of which has impacted my own approach to handling emotions in sessions. Specifically, I resonate with their claim that "writing centers are uniquely positioned to help promote a holistic approach to education by focusing on tutoring the whole person" (Driscoll & Wells). Instead of viewing sessions with tutees as solely intellectual matters, they emphasize the inseparability of emotions and writing and the ways in which addressing emotions in a session can help more fully develop a writer. Their perspective on emotions has made me consider tutoring in a new, more personal light that I feel more fully encompasses our role as peer tutors. In openly acknowledging the identities and emotions of tutees, we not only create a more welcoming environment for them, but we also give ourselves as tutors the necessary lens to come to a complete understanding of the writer and writing in front of us, allowing for a more informed and effective session.

Shifting my own view of tutoring to "the whole person" has been invaluable in my practice as a tutor thus far. One of my most recent sessions has helped me come to this realization. In this particular session, the topic of the piece was a movie that I happened to thoroughly enjoy. Knowing this going into the session gave us a mutual enjoyment from which to begin building a genuine relationship. This experience made me realize the value of viewing

the tutee as a person and not just a project. I feel like too often I have held back from relating to my tutees, not allowing my own emotions to show. Yet, in doing so, I have failed to allow them a space to feel comfortable expressing themselves, preventing us from reaching the status of peers, or further, "professional friends." I found the session to be less stressful and more productive by incorporating the holistic approach of Driscoll & Wells. I felt like I truly was just conversing with a friend, allowing questions to flow naturally and genuinely. This had a positive effect on my tutoring practice and gave me more confidence in the strategies I employed. This session helped develop how I saw the theory I had read, altering the way in which I now seek to practice.

Through analyzing my view of the writing center's function, writing itself, and the process of tutoring writing, I have come to a more complete understanding of my values as a writing center tutor. Ultimately, I believe that tutoring writing should be collaborative and conversation based, stemming from a view of knowledge as socially constructed and escaping from the student-teacher hierarchy present in most forms of education. I believe that I as a peer tutor must harmonize both my role as a peer and a tutor in order to best serve my tutee, which requires a constant navigation of imbalances in expertise and a negotiation of power to retain the equal status so imperative to peer-to-peer work. I believe that a tutee's choice and agency must take priority over institutional standards and disciplinary expectations, for my loyalty as a tutor must be to my tutee first and foremost. And I believe that as a tutor, I have a responsibility to accommodate all aspects of my tutee's identity and emotions, as they are integral to written works and the writing process. To this end, I must be willing to embrace and present my own emotions in order to create the genuine relationships that foster the most organic collaboration. These are the guidelines that are central to my tutoring, informed by both the theory I have read and the practice I have engaged in.

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Addendum - 16 May 2025

After a second semester of tutoring in the writing center, I am in agreement with the majority of my original philosophy, as I have seen the principles surrounding collaboration, peer relationships, identity, and literacy reinforced by my practice thus far. The following addendum addresses a few gaps in my original tutoring philosophy that have emerged after engaging with readings and reflecting on my practice.

> And, with collaboration at the forefront, the writing center holds value to the student by providing them agency in their learning. This collaboration and agency runs counter to the common narrative of academic instruction… (1)

As I develop my idea of the writing center and its value here, I mention the importance of giving the tutee agency in their learning and writing. However, I now find it necessary to define what I mean when I say "agency" and the nuances involved in its distribution.

When I say agency, I consider Martini's view that writers, tutors, and the writing center as a whole should be "aware of [their] own autonomy and can thus take action and make meaning on [their] own terms," (Martini 90). To me, this autonomy is crucial to the operation of the writing center at each of these levels. Historically, the writing center has operated in pursuit of the university or faculty's agency instead of its own (90). In order to best serve its students and continue offering a collaborative environment that challenges traditional hierarchies, the writing center must break free from these external agents and make meaning for itself, acting according to its own defined values. This agency should empower the tutors to act with *their* own agency, even if that means refusing to yield to university expectations or center policies when that would endorse injustice and violence (92). By empowering tutors with the agency to act counter to

these policies, they are allowed to most completely offer the writers they are working with agency to make meaning out of their own writing, even if that means breaking free from conventional expectations.

> Principles of collaboration, peer relationships, loyalty, and an offering of choices that push against the 'standard' should be the guiding forces of writing center operation. (3)

These "guiding forces" are rooted in resistance to institutional discrimination and language standardization, and because of this, I believe that the writing center is a place that is naturally equipped to contribute to meaningful changes in institutional policy. I find this to be an important consideration when discussing the ways that the writing center should operate, especially in light of the readings I was assigned this semester. Specifically, I consider Williams' view of relational change from her exploration of the writing center as an enclave. According to Williams, change can occur "from the inside out, at the relational level," giving us "the ability to attend to and articulate our values on a daily basis through reframing the narratives and emotions that define meanings in social spaces of the university," (12). For the writing center, this means that each interaction we have as tutors with the writers who enter our space can help lay the foundation for lasting change in institutional policies or mainstream ideas about writing and language. I agree with this view of change, seeing it as a natural part of the work that the writing center is already doing by faithfully serving its writers. This type of change is certainly slow and incremental, but I find it to be the best means of balancing the desire to make meaningful changes based on the shared values of the writing center and continuing to fulfill the practical role it holds at the university. This balance can be most effectively achieved through the use of resistant language when discussing genre conventions, language standardization, and external expectations within

sessions. In placing this philosophy of change at the forefront of our practice, we can contribute to lasting change through our service, no matter how small it may seem.

> ...this approach to navigating expertise allows both the role of peer and tutor to operate together within a session while still granting full ownership of the work to the writer. (6)

As I have considered the navigation of expertise more and more, I see it connected to the question of directiveness a lot more explicitly than is explained here. I would like to take the time to establish this connection and explore how I see directiveness functioning in my practice now.

Navigating expertise as a tutor can mean deciding when to directly offer our own writing expertise and when to withhold our own knowledge for the sake of emphasizing the tutee's ownership. This decision is, by its very nature, a matter of directivity; how much guidance should be loaded into our words? As I began tutoring, I was very wary of using any directivity in my practice, looking for ways to stay nondirective at all times. But as my practice evolves, I see the potential uses for directiveness more and more. Part of this process has been moving from a view of directiveness as a binary—either directive or nondirective—to seeing it more as a spectrum. This view comes primarily from Kopec's understanding of "degrees of directivity," which "involves analyzing the dynamic of the tutoring session and then utilizing that typically forgotten ability to compromise between two extremes," (Kopec). In this view, the ideal is still the "open-ended non-directive question, which is designed to elicit a response from students without the tutor hinting towards the 'correct' answer," (Kopec). However, this type of question is not always effective, especially when the tutee seems to be really struggling with a concept or is no longer engaged in the session. By progressively asking more and more direct questions, a

tutor can narrow in on the concept they are trying to convey until they reach the ‘degree of directivity’ that yields understanding. These leading questions can help bring our tutee’s focus to specific areas of their own writing, helping them find new ways to engage with their work while still reinforcing their ownership and “creating a relationship between writers and their own words,” (Kopec).

I saw this idea emerging in my practice through the act of offering informed choices to my tutees such that their agency was maintained and their ownership was highlighted. In my self-observed session, this action contributed to a pivotal moment in the session’s progression. When my tutee expressed uncertainty in deciding what story to use as she continued her statement of purpose, “I framed my response as a question back to her, so as to mute my own bias in the decision making process,” (Fisk 2). It was important to use a question here so that she could retain ownership of the work by making the final decision, but even so, I knew that a non-directive question such as “which story do you think would work best in this situation?” wouldn’t get us anywhere since she was struggling to make the determination by herself as it was. To compromise, I chose to preface my question with an explanation of the potential value of choosing one of the stories over the other. Instead of loading the question in such a way that it would directly guide her to a specific answer, I put both answers in perspective of her overall purpose and still had her choose because I was confident that she could answer it on her own with just a little bit of guidance. Instead of a vague and unhelpful open-ended question, I used my writing expertise to help her better understand her choices, using a more directive approach to guide her to a more informed position for making her decision. Even in this instance of being a bit more directive in my inquiry, I was able to empower my tutee to make their own decision with confidence, something that I constantly aspire to achieve in my practice.

> In openly acknowledging the identities and emotions of tutees… we also give ourselves as tutors the necessary lens to come to a complete understanding of the writer and writing in front of us, allowing for a more informed and effective session. (7)

While I still aspire to this idea of "tutoring the whole person" and believe it is a valuable part of tutoring writing, my actual practice has departed from this goal recently. Continuing in my practice has made me aware of how tunnel-visioned I can become on the writing task, failing to pause and consider the writer as a person, often to the detriment of the session. This happened at some points in both my self-observed session and my director-observed session this semester.

In the self-observed session, I was dealing with a statement of purpose for a transfer application, a task that by its very nature calls for an exploration of one's personality, purposes, and motivations. However, when she did begin to unpack her reasoning for pursuing the program she was transferring into, "I simply [related] to her experiences and quickly [moved] our focus back to the work at hand," (Fisk 6). The personal aspect of the session was sacrificed in the name of returning to the 'productive work' of the writing itself. Upon reflection, I see this as a failure to further engage with her interests and motivations in a way that could not only build comfortability but contribute directly to the ideas that the session could yield.

In the director-observed session, this failure to engage with the whole person haunted me throughout the entire forty-five minutes in the form of unnecessary haste. The tutee came into the center and began the session very frantically, rushing to get right into the writing. I allowed myself to get swept up in the haste, failing to engage with her about why she was so frantic or make any attempt to slow down and ground her. Because of this missed opportunity, I believe

that we lost out on the potential for concrete goal-setting, more contemplative productivity, and the creation of a true peer-to-peer connection.

Both of these instances remind me that "tutoring the whole person" is more difficult than I first anticipated, requiring a willingness to depart from the text and dive deeper into the author behind it. Despite this difficulty, I still believe that it is a critical component of the work we do and will not let these failures become the norm. Instead, I hope to learn from these instances the consequences of dismissing the personhood of the author, both on the peer connection and conversational depth of the session.

We spent a lot of time this semester considering the implications of generative AI on writing and our work in the writing center, and I would be remiss not to explain how my understanding of generative AI has evolved in the context of the Writing Center.

Before our conversations surrounding generative AI, I held a strictly negative opinion of it. However, through our discussions, I began to develop a more charitable view of generative AI by considering the many reasons someone may choose to use it. For example, according to Baek et. al and their research on generative AI usage in the university setting, non-native English speakers who struggle with grammar can use AI to combat their writing anxieties and boost self-efficacy (6). As a native English speaker myself, I can sometimes lose sight of this perspective, so it was eye-opening to the ways in which generative AI could be used to even the playing field for those who did not grow up with English writing. For these reasons, as well as other potential usage motives we explored in our discussions, I believe that it is important to validate a writer's reasons for choosing to use AI. While I still believe that the next step to take as a tutor should be to develop the writer's self-efficacy without the use of AI, this step starts

with the validation of the writer's fears and needs. First, we must truly understand the writer's motives and what underlies those, and then provide a judgment free space in return.

Despite this more charitable view towards generative AI usage in writing, I still believe that there are dangers to overreliance on these programs. In Coetzer and van Aardt's exploration of AI-generated text, they explain how overreliance can "deprive students of the opportunity to engage with a text," and prevent "students' academic opinions and student voices" from being heard (173). To consider also is the fact that generative AI are trained primarily through Western, often outdated sources that lead it towards biased responses, rendering them "unable to contribute to the call for decolonisation," (174). As someone whose view of one's writing is so intermingled with one's identity, I cannot endorse a program that silences the writer's voice, especially one that contributes to confirmation of its own Western biases. Generative AI's responses also contribute to a loss of the writing idiosyncrasies that set a writer apart or challenge standard language ideology, another important aspect of my philosophy as a writing center tutor. Despite validating their reasons for wanting to use AI, I ultimately believe that the best way to empower a student to put their own voice forward and claim ownership of their writing is to discourage the use of AI and help them work through their writing concerns themselves. While this may not always be the easiest course of action, I believe it is necessary in encouraging writerly agency and ownership.

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