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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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