"Meeting Them Where They're At": Power Dynamics within the Language of Student-Tutor Interactions

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Abstract

This qualitative case study is aimed towards interrogating what and how language is utilized within writing center student-tutor interactions to inherently sustain or subvert institutional power dynamics. In loosely structured interviews with both students and tutors, three key themes were found as significant trends throughout the collective data. First, newer individuals exposed to interactions at the writing center disproportionately reinforce hierarchical norms. Second, verbal communication choices have the potential to be "overly nice" or act as a form of capitalist politeness, further obscuring systemic inequalities. Finally, body language materially encodes itself within cultural assumptions about authority and the physical space. By exposing how this power operates, this research argues for transformative tutoring practices that challenge the oppressive structures, center student agency, and reject performative practices of authority.

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"Meeting Them Where They're At": Power Dynamics within the Language of Student-

Tutor Interactions

To begin, my passionate interest within the field of writing studies is what led me to

investigate the relations between the writing center, language, and power dynamics for my

honors thesis. As a current Writing Specialist at Nevada State's Writing Center, and previously

as an ENG 101/102 Embedded Peer Leader for the University's Academic Success Center,

directly involving myself with students' writing processes through a potential authoritative status

led me to question whether or not it greatly impacted session outcomes. Being interested within a

Marxist (1887) framework early into my academic career, I sought to discover how the student-

tutor dynamic inherently upholds power dynamics, and if so, what methods can be utilized to

dismantle it? What I found was that time allowed for the initial thoughts on power dynamics to

be deconstructed, with verbal communication choices carrying the potential to be "overly nice",

while body language serves as a real-time tool of resistance against the hierarchical tutoring

standard.

My identity as a first-generation college student coming from a working-class

background has attuned my research to discover how language in specific, becomes

commodified, and therefore gatekept as a form of linguistic capital to continue to oppress those

from marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, my heritage as a Filipino-

American further emphasizes this, as although I am not fluent in my parents' native tongue of

Tagalog, the widespread metric of Standard Academic English (SAE) being the superior

vernacular is an argument I am strongly against (Zorn, 2005).

Considering this, these identities will influence how I interpret my project, providing me

with a critical standpoint that is rooted in advocacy against the dominant systems that harm

marginalized voices, allowing me to ask: What kind of language is used at the writing center and how does it uncover inherent power dynamics between the student and tutor?

Despite arguments from Zorn (2010) and Carino (2003) on how SAE must remain as the norm in education, and that writing center tutors must uphold an authoritative status in session, their discussions share problematic assumptions that reinforce institutional power on students. Through this, both individuals inevitably harm student agency, perpetuate linguistic racism within White supremacy, and avoid structural critique due to their dominant positions in academia. It was with this context in mind that I sought to research the relations in power dynamics, language, and student-tutor interactions to dismantle the oppressive institutional power structures. For the purpose of this study, I define power dynamics as the ways in which power, the capacity to impose authority, is distributed between students and tutors to shape hierarchies, access needs, and agency. To further investigate these relations, I conducted loosely structured interviews with three students and three tutors at Nevada State University. Through them, I was able to identify how initial thoughts on power dynamics altered over a period of time, as well as how the language within verbal and nonverbal communication both played a role in dismantling these corrupt institutional systems of power.

Literature Review

Writing Centers & Language

When it comes to exploring how the language within student-tutor sessions uncover the inherent power dynamics between both sides of the interaction, previous writing center scholarship certainly becomes a key resource into the matter as it recognizes the need to investigate the topic even further. For instance, Kalamazoo College Writing Center Consultants, Angelica Rodriguez and Ayla Hull (2019) provide theoretical knowledge specific to tutors,

emphasizing that "we exist within institutions that privilege certain types of writers and writing…set by the dominant academic system" (para. 3). Building on this, University of Notre Dame Writing Center Director, Michelle A. Marvin (2023) expands on the linguistic conversation by expressing how the "we" language standard should not be looked at as the grand narrative, as in addition to its ability of inclusion, it also has the potential to exclude students further away. While both texts critique the inherent power structures produced at an institutional and societal level, whether that be an ideological shift within writing center practices or the language choices utilized by tutors, it is still important to recognize that not everyone has the same radical mindset.

To delve deeper into this conversation regarding linguistics, I sought it best to also consider the ways in which body language and power dynamics correlate, especially in a writing center setting. In a more broad study on gender affecting body language in a perceived social status, Bailey and Kelly (2015) discover that a woman's use of counter-stereotypical nonverbal displays are able to alter how they are perceived in terms of power. Additionally, in a writing center space, Faison (2018) notes how in Black tutors, "there is just this body language that is inherently Black regardless of where you're from [in the African Diaspora]. It isn't something white people do…you don't learn to be Black, you are (Black)". All these scholars argue for the idea that in addition to verbal language, one's physical demeanor is able to advocate for their own agency. Considering these themes, my research plans to build on this discussion further, focusing specifically on the power dynamics between tutors and students within body language, and how this may look from culture to culture.

Apart from language, I thought it wise to identify perspectives within the writing center community that do not align with one another, leading me to a viewpoint that is certainly

different when it comes to the beliefs around power dynamics. Writing Center Scholar, Peter Carino (2003) interestingly suggests that despite the efforts of writing centers fostering collaboration, the power held by tutors is inevitable, and the conversation should now turn into a discussion on how to ethically utilize this authority. Although these authors mention multiple perspectives towards power dynamics and language within a writing center setting, a common gap is derived from the missed inclusion of direct student narratives. Within my study, I plan to consider ideas such as overall student comfort in sessions, student opinions on the longitudinal outcomes of the "we" language standard, and the possibility of student resistance against tutor authority. Through this newfound recognition of students' perspectives, my research will strive to start filling in the gaps of previous works and pave for a new path of discoveries within the field of writing center studies.

Linguistic Justice

Across the connections between language, power dynamics, and student-tutor sessions, the theme of linguistic justice evidently lies at the center of it all, making it a pivotal factor that must be considered during all stages of this study. Prior to this approach's more apparent upbringing within recent years, Santa Clara University Professor Emeritus, Jeff Zorn (2010) argues that SAE has a level of inherent superiority over all other vernaculars, specifically categorizing 'street talk' as insufficient for intellectual complexity. Countering this, the approach's originator, April Baker-Bell (2020) elicits that such demands perpetuate anti-Black linguistic racism, specifying that SAE is reflected as the language of conquest and domination, hiding the diverse voices of multiple marginalized communities.

Complicating this debate further, University of Edinburgh Academic, Pip Thornton (2018) suggests that the sole notion behind SAE is driven behind the market profit of linguistic

capitalism, the commodification of language within the digital age. As its involvement is pertinent to this study, the writing center's position is a gap not outwardly discussed within these texts on linguistic justice. Considering this, one starts to ask: Are they sites to solely liberate traditional norms such as SAE? Is their goal to counter assimilation-oriented objectives through the inclusion of anti-racist pedagogies? How are they affected by a capitalist agenda? All of these questions become relevant within my study, as the connections between linguistic justice and student-tutor sessions at the writing center will be further investigated upon.

Theoretical Frameworks

Since my research explores the relationship between power dynamics, language, and student-tutor interactions at the writing center, the theoretical frameworks chosen for my analysis were centered around investigating how hierarchies operate within institutional discourses. By employing Marxist (1867) theory, the idea of linguistic capital is brought into question, identifying how student-tutor interactions may inherently uplift or directly challenge standardized education models such as SAE. Building on this thought further, Yosso (2006) inherently incorporates Critical Race Theory (CRT) into Marxist beliefs, specifically expanding upon how marginalized groups create alternative systems of value that capitalism also affects, even outside of the economy. For instance, resistant capital, the oppositional behavior that challenges inequalities, specifically stands out to me. My research will help illuminate how student-tutor interactions reveal any inherent power dynamics within their language, and how the behavior of both sides either resist or uphold the traditional norms.

In addition, the utilization of a Freiren (1970) pedagogy implemented into these discussions on power and capital, highlights the core concept of the banking model of education and the need for dialogic learning. By viewing its incorporation through specifically student-

tutor interactions, an aspect of pedagogical liberation with the goal of transforming tutoring into a co-created praxis to dismantle hierarchies of power will be revealed. This tripartite framework of Marx (1867), Yosso (2006), and Freire (1970), will help enrich my research on investigating what and how the language of student-tutor interactions, with an application of integral concepts aimed to expose inherent institutional systems of power, affects the writing center space, while also maintaining a contemporary view on the matter at hand.

Methods

For the purpose of collecting and analyzing de-identified information, all procedures utilized for my research were completed at Nevada State University. As of Spring 2025 ("Enrollment by NSU"), the university serves an incredibly diverse set of enrolled students, with 42% of that population being students who are Hispanics of any race, therefore designating the institution as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). With the institution's commitment heavily guided under inclusion and social justice to support people from historically marginalized communities, it only then becomes natural that its Writing Center also actively reflects similar missions, beliefs, and values. As a Writing Specialist myself, the required training I underwent focuses on an approach that consistently rejects linguistic standardization, actively educating tutors under a pedagogy that supports anti-racist frameworks, trauma-informed praxes, and social justice initiatives. To gain insights from this campus population on the relations between power dynamics, language, and student-tutor interactions, I had the pleasure to conduct six loosely structured interviews, engaging with three writing center tutors: Lark, Rook, and Viso, as well as three students: Solaria, Fable, and Alma.

Methodology

In order to protect the participants' privacy and confidentiality, all of their information became de-identified, with everything being stored in a password-protected Google Drive. Additionally, the participant names used for this project are pseudonyms, either chosen by me or them, to again, uphold secrecy. Prior to performing the interviews, I underwent the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process to recognize the ethics behind research practices, ensure my project follows federal regulations, and to deepen my understanding on how to maintain secured participant data. Once I became IRB certified, I then was able to begin my interviews with participants, which included two question sets depending if they were either a student or tutor. These questions are listed in the appendix after the references. Potential students and tutors received emails asking for their participation in the study. As a Writing Specialist, I have access to their emails through Penji and session intake sheets. To choose the participants included in my study, certain qualification criteria must be met: 18-years of age or older, had at least one previous writing center session, and selected Writing Center Specialists must be currently employed by Nevada State University. Once the participants were chosen, interviews were held in a locked office, data became transcribed into a script, their information got de-identified, and then coded to discover any relevant themes.

Coding & Analysis

To further analyze the data, I cleaned and de-identified transcripts from my loosely structured interviews utilizing in vivo coding. As Saldana (2009) states, in vivo coding has been labeled as "literal coding", with its root meaning being "in that which is alive", and through its application, "[researchers] are more likely to capture the meanings inherent in people's experience" (p. 74-75). An important factor to me during this project was to ensure that my participants' voices were being preserved, so that their emotions could be captured within the

themes I present. In addition, I find that in vivo coding was another inherent way marginalized groups are able to dismantle dominant opinion, by prioritizing and uplifting the silenced.

Results

Throughout all of my interviews between tutors and students, our conversations pointed towards significant ideas on how both groups visualize language's placement in the writing center space regarding inherent power dynamics. More generally speaking, the discussions with the tutors presented how language can be used as a tool to ease student discomfort, the impact of previous experience influencing how one views themselves as an authority figure, and the non-traditional nature of the writing center. On the other hand, student thoughts revolved around the importance of language within balancing power dynamics, whether or not an authority figure is truly presenting during interactions with tutors, and the writing center's nature to be a place to destress on campus. While actively engaging in these loosely structured interviews illustrated an immense amount of information relative to my research, I argue that three, overarching themes more notably emerged in various areas between both the tutor and the student. These findings are: the writing center's stark influence of the initial thoughts on power dynamics, the reimagining of verbal communication as a double-edged sword, and body language's reflection on the physical space.

The first of which, I will examine how tutors and students both consider how Nevada State's Writing Center affects their initial thoughts on power dynamics, with a specific regard on how time is incorporated as an important factor through it all. Next, closely focusing on verbal communication choices such as intentional wording, the cutting of negative self-talk, codeswitching, "I" vs. "we" language, and the harm of being overly nice will recognize its consequences of both the good and bad. Finally, carefully considering body language choices

within tutor demeanors, certain gestures, and "inviting" students to be in the writing center will reflect how attention to the physical space allows for a challenge to the power dynamics.

Initial Thoughts in the Writing Center on Power Dynamics

A frequent thought that came up during my loosely structured interviews with the tutors was that in their position, primarily all of them viewed themselves as not an authority figure, but just as another student like those they constantly work with. When asked if they see themselves in a position of power and authority during student-tutor interactions, Lark remarked:

> No, I don't feel like I'm being trusted with authority. I even like to explain this difference when I'm in my sessions, it's not that I have authority, it's that I have expertise. It's not that I am the pinnacle of good writing, and I know all the ins and outs about how to be proper, it's just that I write frequently. I like to establish that what separates me from them is not that I'm just some super powerful, incredible, smart person that knows everything you could possibly know about MLA, I am a student who just writes more often so I may know what to do (Lark, 2025).

Lark's perspective on the power dynamics within the writing center did not just begin instantly, but in actuality, it is derived from a history that allowed them to soften up overtime and stop reinforcing the imaginary rules on how to become a "good" writer. As mentioned numerously within our interview together, they exclaimed how "learning should be fun", further emphasizing a writing center-based pedagogy focused on collaboration rather than institutional expectations (Lark, 2025). By resisting a viewpoint within the dominant systems of higher education regarding what it means to learn, Lark rejects the position of the enforcer and instead leans towards a position that validates student concerns to bridge the gaps between one another. In addition, Rook's responses on the same question reiterates these same beliefs entirely.

Rook's thoughts more largely focused on how the writing center's pedagogy itself empowered them to reject the status of an authoritative figure within student-tutor interactions. This is further emphasized as they often looked back at their past work within elementary school and how the values of the CCSD system immensely differed from those held by Nevada State University. When asked on the differences between working with elementary kids and college students, they highlighted how a transition from embracing the authoritative status to denying it was needed, specifically stating:

> Yes, so certainly I think to really tie into what you're discovering here, I think particularly at the writing center, since we have anti-racist pedagogies and are promoting linguistic justice and things like that. I know when I came from roles and positions where I did have to be an authoritative figure, languages are important in the way that you facilitate certain instructions, and I find that coming to the writing center was more of like—it's less being told how to do something and more on why you do some stuff (Rook, 2025).

Coming from a system like CCSD, in which they train their faculty to be authoritative rather than instructor, Rook felt as if they were able to view the power dynamics in a more colorful, nuanced standpoint, alleviating the stress held upon their previous binary view of black and white. Both perspectives held by Lark and Rook, reflect the writing center's goal on striving towards collaboration, revealing that their time in the space has allowed them to garner a passion to even the traditional power dynamics and challenge the dominant systems that develop these ideas altogether. However, with Viso being relatively newer in the writing center, their stance reveals differences to the past tutors viewpoints on considering themselves as authorities.

In comparison with the previously mentioned tutors, Viso actually do see themselves as an authoritative figure during student-tutor interactions. In their response, they mention how this authoritative status comes with the writing center job, but more specifically, they note:

> I think a lot of the times I do see myself as that kind of figure…For example, I felt like I'd be more equal to a student, but since I was hired, I felt like there's a level of like, like, what would you call this? Um, like, cause I got accepted [to work] the writing center, so it's like a position that I have now. I feel like that also affects my social role in a lot of ways, especially when students like to come in for a writing session (Viso, 2025).

Whether it be changing their vocabulary to connect with a student more deeply or altering their tone to fit the session atmosphere, they feel as if this displacement between themselves and those they work with does not equate to a certain level of equalness. However, as the session progresses they instead remove this inherent authority that is placed on them, and transfer it to the student, noting that, "They should have the authority and I should be here more as like a directing kind of person, and probably not directing actually, but like somebody guiding…I feel like it's more, how would I say this? I mean, I guess simply is probably more freeing for them (Viso, 2025). As the session progresses, Viso first embraces an inherent authority that they receive due to their status in the writing center and instead gives it to the student, often mimicking a progressive challenge to the power dynamics.

Considering the thoughts of all the students I conducted a loosely structured interview with, a wide majority mention how the writing center, at first, was a place they were scared to receive help from. As it stemmed from previous encounters they have had regarding their overall writing process, from the fear of red penning their work to harsh comments on what they failed

to complete, the space initially reminded them of their writing insecurities. When discussing this

further, Solaria mentions how this was a totally new experience for them:

> Yeah, I would say I kind of didn't really know what to expect. For me, I didn't really have
> anyone to help me with my writing and usually I've had bad experiences with writing
> especially because I've had teachers throughout K through 12 who told me to write in the
> way where they are the voice and I'm just the writer. Yeah, and I am basically the
> oppressed, so for me it was kind of new to have, not only a collaborative experience, but
> a space where I can openly talk about my writing and I don't have to be afraid of
> minimizing my voice (Solaria, 2025).

Emphasizing this new experience further, Fable expresses how they initially viewed writing

center tutors as an authority, until they were aware of a key detail, the fact that they were

students as well. As they said, "I wasn't too aware that my writing center had students who were

like still in classes like me, they were just like literally my peers in my classrooms…because I

didn't have that understanding and I didn't know that I felt like that's why I viewed them more as

an authority figure (Fable, 2025). As it has been expressed to new students utilizing the service,

the writing center initially starts as a place that harbors an individual's writing insecurities, but

through some time, the collaborative environment truly thrives between them and the tutors.

Verbal Communication: A Double-Edged Sword

When thinking about my research question on the inherent power dynamics present

within a writing center space, an immense majority of my interviews with both the tutors and

students centered around language and the linguistic choices both groups utilize to produce an

effective interaction. Considering verbal communication, the process of exchanging information

through spoken words, an essential step that a majority of tutors made sure to implement in their

interactions with students was the incorporation of intentional wording. For Lark, this comes in the form of cutting any negative talk from either themselves or the student, as its effect in doing so allowed for a way to not only ease student discomfort, but also even the power dynamics between them. Their viewpoint in this incorporation also consideration what the job of writing specialist inherently becomes:

> I like to cut off any negative self-talk immediately as soon as they present me with something negative. I'm immediately like, I'm certain you're not that bad. I'm certain you're...I have faith in you. I trust in your ability to do this. I feel like 95% of our job sometimes is just like that confidence encouragement. 95% of our job is just reinforcing that the student is on the right path and giving them that reassurance. No matter how stressed out they are, no matter how confused they say they are, I'm pretty sure you have it to some extent. Let's take a deep breath. We'll figure this out (Lark, 2025).

Lark's methodology on handling student stress reaffirms to them that the writing center is a space that validates their emotions, the focus on collaboration is apparent to let them know they are not alone, and allows for time to recollect their thoughts in dire situations. By incorporating this regularly into their session, Lark inherently becomes an active challenger of the traditional power dynamic system, from reducing their hierarchical authority in this position to advocating student voice in times where they may feel powerless.

Building on the cutting of negative talk, Rook's routines within verbal communication during student-tutor interactions revolved around the utilization of code-switching, a method that allowed them to build rapport with the Spanish-speaking community. For them, code-switching was not just an option they can lean on when students did not primarily speaking English, it was

even a way to disrupt the idea behind an academic language supremacy that places SAE

inherently above all other vernaculars:

> I think code switching is very useful because it also allows you to communicate more
>
> accurately if that's what you were brought up with, versus, more technical, strategized
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> methods of communication. I think there are some concepts in the world of academics
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> that I don't think translate very well. And there's some where they are translated better
>
> through code switching. I think it's more accurate, opposed to the academic language that
>
> they always put forth (Rook, 2025).

Code switching, as a verbal communication technique, was also a way for Rook to become more

ingrained with the campus community, since Nevada State University is also an HSI. Being able

to connect with students by centering their comfort over the institutional norms of higher

education overall dismantles the privileging of dominant language norms, fully allowing tutors to

truly meet where the students are at in the writing process. Through the instant removal of

negative talk and the implementation of code switching within student-tutor interactions, these

intentional wording techniques echo the anti-racist pedagogies and collaboration efforts that

serve as a basis within the writing center. By doing so, the writing center as a whole also

becomes a product intended to deconstruct the inherent power dynamics that serve as a plague at

an institutional level.

      In addition to the tutors' adherence to intentional wording, another verbal communication

factor that got brought up during my interviews was the influence of the "I" versus "we"

language for both the tutors and students. Through Lark's standpoint, utilizing a "we" language

is once again, another testament into rejecting their potential authoritative position:

I feel like it once again, it evens the playing field and closes that power dynamic because

it's the "you have to do this" and "you have to do that" and "you need to do that", I feel

like that can get a little bit too demanding, and it's a lot to follow. Whereas "we're going

to go through this", that's my way of letting you know that we're not going to stop until

you feel comfortable (Lark, 2025).

Distributing that ownership of work, implying that they do not hold all of the answers, and

allowing the student to become aware that they are both in it together as a team were all of the

goals Lark had intended with this incorporation. As said previously though, Marvin (2023) has

argued that the "we" language should not be looked at as the grand narrative every writing center

should follow, but instead something that should be used more sparingly and reflexively. This

consideration is to certainly be held true, especially once Solaria's opinions are brought into the

mix.

During my interview with Solaria, the harm of the "I" language was first brought up

when discussing whether or not the tutors they have worked with have utilized language to

express their authority over them. In response, they begin to recall how a past experience in 12th

grade showcased their dislike for "I" statements in writing:

[My teacher] was like, "*I* understand that you don't want to forgive her", but this is an

essay. "*I* want you to have this kind of thing where you learn to forgive", "*I* want you to

write this letter in a way that you can forgive them", "*I* want you to basically be the voice

of reason". All of these statements made me feel as if I was doing something wrong, it

made me feel as if my voice doesn't matter (Solaria, 2025, emphasis in original).

As one is able to recognize, the consistent use of "I" made Solaria feel insecure, limiting their

overall voice in an essay that is supposed to be theirs, and instead, it just became a product of

their teacher's opinion. Considering this, an excessive usage of "we" instead will accomplish the same thing, unintentionally becoming coercive rather than collaborative. In order to stray away from this entirely, the "we" language within student-tutor interactions must be incorporated strategically, ensuring their voice can still be heard in their own writing and not just become another method to enforce authority as a polished directive inherently.

While implementing "we" language within student-tutor interactions may appear as something that will always support any student that comes in for a session, there is another consideration to think about within this incorporation. The concept of "being overly nice" was brought to my attention during my interview with Fable, as it has been something that affected their own writing. Although not explicitly said to work in tandem with the "we" language, they remark its harm is shown through another another way, not yet said previously:

> So like overly nice, I mean like there's no, there's really like no critical feedback being given. Like there's no like feedback being given to really help the student, it's just the overuse of using like "this is good", "just believe in yourself", and like, you know students need to hear a lot too, you know, but it was just that paired with not listening to the student and just sending them on their way that I had noticed at one point (Fable, 2025).

In other words said by Fable, tutors being overly nice within student-tutor interactions can turn into a problem of infantilization, patronizing students, shifting their roles from collaborators to caretakers instead. If tutors are to challenge the power dynamic between them and students, they must find a balance between positivity and critique, as although they may be used with good intentions, they have inherently negative outcomes when not used carefully. Through this, verbal

communication becomes a double-edged sword with differing outcomes depending on a tutor's awareness and usage when it comes to student-tutor interactions.

Body Language and the Physical Space

Serving as a final shared theme across my loosely structured interviews with both the tutors and students, body language became as equally as important with verbal communication, especially once both groups started to consider the physical space at the writing center. In specific, a majority of tutors only started to examine how their own body language operated in challenging the power dynamics first, with regard to the physical space close behind. Through the eyes of Rook, their demeanor focused on following behind the student's footsteps, instead of outwardly taking the lead within writing sessions. To them, it was just another method into easing student discomfort:

Not only that, but even body language, I use that a lot. Like I'll kind of be more relaxed and more of a like, careless nature of things, because I find that they're more easygoing when you're not in their space or heavily involved in what they're doing (Rook, 2025).

Immediately following this, they started to analyze how this reflects their own movements at the writing center and how they essentially "invite" students to make the first move. Not only did they keep students' best interests in mind, but they also gravely considered how they would want to be treated if they were in the shoes of students. For instance, they mention as well, "And just asking permission before doing things that you wouldn't, I wouldn't want for other students to like step in front of me out of nowhere" (Fable, 2025). This mindset held by Fable allows for students to take the lead in their interactions, as it is not the tutor's responsibility in doing so, thus allowing for a more natural conversation between the peers with one another. This behavior of body language is mimicked through the actions of Viso as well, albeit, in a different way.

For Viso, body language became the primary focal point of our interview together, whether that be due to their heritage's importance on the act, or even their slight background within public speaking. For them, gestures such as the ways in which they move their hands or the choice of putting their elbows on the table became vital factors that made this certainly apparent:

> I try to also like, I guess try to reduce the kind of like body space and make sure I also like, give, an amount of like space for the student. I want them to also feel like they're invited to the table in a sense, because I know sometimes too, I noticed like I put my elbows on the table and I felt like that's very controlling in a sense, so I stopped that (Viso, 2025).

For them, body language was not just an inherent act, it became something they became aware of, often being decisive on how they presented themselves during student-tutor interactions. Much like Rook, they wanted to invite the students into the writing center, reducing the physical space between them, and transferring the authoritative status in which they started with to them, highlighting their equalness in power. Further proving this, is how they allow students the agency to choose where they sit in the physical space, noting specifically, "it gives them a lot more control when it especially is their first time, like how they will probably approach the center after our interaction together" (Viso, 2025). Again, their actions within body language deeply considers how the students will view the physical space after the interaction with one another. My interview with Alma serves to be a testament for why this statement rings true.

Although only coming to the writing center space for only one session alone, Alma's experience with their tutor highlighted how a welcoming physical space is able to also disrupt a power hierarchy that may be present. When asked on this topic further, they comment:

> Like, although I've only ever came to the writing center for one session, the actual space itself was unlike anything I have ever seen before on campus. For me, I really enjoyed how the center uses round tables when working with students, since during my session, we were able to work together instead of someone just telling me what to do (Alma, 2025).

The writing center's decor became another topic throughout our interview together, with Alma (2025) mentioning how the inclusion of couches, LGBTQIA+ flags, and the signage reaffirming multilingual identities made them feel at home. Through this, it becomes apparent how also the physical gap between students and tutors becomes notably smaller as an interaction progresses. Not only is the physical space evident to that, but also the tutors' inclusive body language that grants students of their agency within session inside a true site for liberation.

Discussion

Within the themes I have identified in my loosely structured interviews with both tutors and students alike, nothing strikingly different from past scholarship arose, however, my findings now serve as specific expansions on said research. The first of which being, the idea of time, and how newer tutors and students exposed to interactions at the writing center are more susceptible to the hierarchical tutoring norms. Viso in particular, initially views themself as an authoritative figure at the beginning of session, while my interview with Solaria showcased how their perspective originally viewed interactions as an oppressive experience. This is complicated even further in the eyes of Rook, an experienced writing center tutor, who speaks on this theme plainly, saying that if diversity was not such a high priority in the center, newer tutors would still be afraid to challenge these norms. Yet, as time progressed within both their respective interactions and additional engagement at the writing center occurred, their complicity with

traditional norms became altered, underscoring their more-freeing standpoints. As emphasized through Rodriguez and Hull (2019), institutions evidently privilege a certain group of writers and writing, more plainly speaking, they breed them to reflect the hierarchical systems of power at a structural level.

As my research has shown, this is replicated even further at an alarming rate, endlessly producing a cycle of systemic tradition that must be abolished to free those from the shackles of oppression. If nothing is done, individuals such as Carino (2003) will linger in academia, and thoughts like these will remain apparent:

> To shackle such a tutor by training him or her only in nondirective methods, in the name of maintaining a nonhierarchical peer relationship, is to shortchange the student lucky enough to be paired with him or her…when tutors lack authority in one area—organizational conventions for a particular type of discourse, for instance—they should feel free to move the tutorial in a direction in which they feel more authoritative.

Writing centers exist as on-campus support services for students, if the space begins to position student voices as passive receptors of information, and not as co-constructors of critical knowledge, the cycle of oppression persists in real-time. Yes, tutors may always inherently wield power whether they like it or not, however if the "pragmatic" solution to it all is to lean into the authority even further, the problem is perpetuated at a level that starts to harm a student's learning exponentially. By passionately standardizing a viewpoint that uplifts a hierarchical ladder and immediately dismissing non directive methods as ineffective pedagogical inconveniences, the writing center becomes nothing more than just a site of colonial harm.

Another theme that I found to further build on past scholarship is the double-edged nature of verbal communication, but more particularly, how pieces of praise can carry negative

consequences for the student. In my interview with Fable, they recall how overly nice feedback led to conversations that lacked ideas on how to refine their writing, and even considered it to be infantilizing in the sense that it patronized their writing. Building on this thought, this is even showcased through my project's discussion revolving around a writing center's "we" language, and how in specific, Marvin (2023) recognized its collective usage as a potential point of performative inclusivity. Although in many cases its utilization is well-intentioned, without considering this outcome, its usage becomes another inherent upheaval for traditional norms in the ways it prioritizes institutional desires over student needs.

To counteract this, the Nevada State Writing Center (n.d.) has incorporated the "Note, React, Ask" method to achieve a flexible harmony between "written or spoken feedback, critique or praise, and macro or micro writing choices" (n.p.) . Although its implementation onto student-tutor interactions appears as the be-all and end-all solution to being overly nice, concerns stemming from Fable, who has previous tutoring experience in the past, mentions fears perpetuating cycles of writing trauma. Following this formula is difficult for some due to their past writing experiences, especially in consideration with balancing positive, critical feedback, without harming one, with again, writing trauma. Due to this valid opinion, I recognized how this concern is also interconnected with the previously mentioned theme of time, and how newer tutors and students, like Viso, are more susceptible to the hierarchical tutoring standards. The connection between newer tutors and students defaulting to the harmful pedagogical methods they experienced does not just go away by labeling something as "collaborative". Tools such as the "Note, React, Ask" feedback model is ingrained into the writing center to disrupt the hierarchical trends apparent right now, in addition to aiding tutors develop balanced responses and reaffirm student agency. However, this all just does not happen in an instant, and will of

course, take time, a vital step that will further allow the power dynamics to be dismantled effectively.

Finally, the relations between body language and the physical space of the writing center serve to be the last apparent overarching theme across my loosely structured interviews. On a deeper level, body language and the physical space do not just exist in the background, but they exist as inherent, pedagogical tools. For example, my interview with Viso primarily focused on body language not because of sheer coincidence, but due to their heritage's importance on nonverbal communication, producing differences between it and white Western norms. This is emphasized even further through Faison (2018), and their arguments on Black tutors' bodies being policed in academia due to an institution's hierarchies on enforcing white-coded body language. Banbury and Hebert (1992) expands this conversation more broadly, especially in consideration with how hierarchies are inherently embodied and resistance to traditions of power are seen through nonverbal engagement. As its pertinence to my study has shown, body language can be utilized to help support writing centers move past ideas of performative inclusivity and ingrain themselves with embodied equity. If tutors are to actively engage in disrupting the hierarchical forms of power within tutoring, recognizing how their body language operates and how it may differ from those in diverse backgrounds is a vital first step.

Theoretical Input

While closely analyzing my conducted interviews with students and tutors, I immediately recognized how my themes inherently echoed my Tripartite framework consisting of Marx (1867), Yosso (2006), and Friere (1970) pedagogies. The first theme, students and tutors being more complicit with hierarchical standards, is fully showcased through Rook's actions,

especially considering how long they have been working at the writing center. Within our interview together, they even speak on this plainly:

> Like I know each specialist varies, but I find that the older the specialist is, the more
>
> likely they are to be comfortable with that level of, um, confronting the standard, opposed
>
> to our younger specialists, and I would assume that it's due to their experience (Rook,
>
> 2025).

This recognition also follows suit with how Rook facilitates sessions with students. They utilize intentional wording to indicate free will, their usage of codeswitching to break the conventional norms of SAE, and their idea to meet the students where they are in the writing process are all instances of this. These values align closely with a Frieren (1970) outlook on education, inherently removing acts of the banking model of education, and to frequently implement the elements of dialogic learning between them and the students. While doing this, Rook also contends with Carino's (2003) arguments on the uselessness of nondirective tutoring methods, directly highlighting to him that tutors do not need to embrace an authoritative position to receive positive student outcomes within sessions.

Following this, I found that the theme on the harm of tutors being "overly nice" closely resonates with my self-defined term of capitalist politeness, which echoes the Marxist (1867) concept of commodity fetishism. In the first volume of his text, "Capital: A Critique of Political Economy", he argues:

> So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the
>
> Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as
>
> commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

Thus, I define capitalist politeness as the ideological mechanisms that uphold capitalist power structures intending to disguise exploitative behavior under a "polite" layer of equal exchange. Now, I begin to consider the concerns of accidentally giving students writing trauma when not utilizing an overly tone in session, which was brought upon Fable's questions on how tutors are supposed to balance praise with critical feedback (2025). By utilizing an intersection of capitalist politeness, trauma-informed pedagogy, and potential tutor hesitancy, approaching interactions with an attitude solely to give students praise, only then denies them the tools for growth. To avoid this capitalist politeness, tutors must give themselves time to recognize the prioritization of being overly nice rather than critical critique only then upholds institutional power standards on the hierarchy of tutoring.

The final theme of body language as a reflection on the physical space, in itself, ties into Yosso's (2006) framework of linguistic capital, in which he defines as "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (p. 78). My interview with Viso showcased to me how resistant capital, in addition to linguistic capital, is blended into how he approaches student-tutor interactions, especially when he starts to consider how his heritage plays a big part into how he presents themself. Through Faison (2018), Black body language is often labeled as incorrect within academia's standards, causing it to be stigmatized. However, if marginalized groups are to play into that, their stigmatization will become further emphasized, so instead, their body language must now be utilized as a tool of resistance against these norms. Ethnic communities who hold a cultural importance to body language should not feel the emotional labor conform to white Western norms, such as translating their communication to white audiences or justifying its use at the writing center.

Conclusion

Before wrapping everything up, it should be noted that when completing my research on the relations between power dynamics, language, and student-tutor interactions, there were multiple limitations that restricted my project more broadly. For starters, NSU is a relatively smaller HSI in the state when compared to others like the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) and the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR). As of Spring 2025, NSU's enrolled student population was 7,415, while UNLV served a total of 32, 911 enrolled students altogether, further emphasizing the smaller scope of students my research was able to cover ("Enrollment by NSU", 2025; "Facts and Stats", 2024). These facts only then start to reflect my other limitations such as my study being on a smaller writing center, and a smaller participant sample size. What compliments this even greater is another limitation, time, especially considering that I conducted my research in the span of a semester, sixteen weeks, and my obligation towards four other courses in addition to this honors thesis.

If granted more time to complete this research, I hope to expand my participant size for both students and tutors, with the goal of finding richer themes. In addition to time, to deepen my results of qualitative data, I wish to perform official observational research, as it would be helpful in garnering more information and questions revolving around body language in real-time. I additionally argue that with my honors thesis being limited to only one semester long, opportunities revolving around longitudinal effects are missed, and how student-tutor interactions evolve over time.

With that being said, my semester-long honors thesis project thoroughly covered how and what language within student-tutor interactions either inherently uplift power dynamics or resist against the hierarchical tutoring standards. The first trend of my research showcased how newer

students and tutors within a writing space are more susceptible to institutional power dynamics. With time, however, these students and tutors are able to be more comfortable with challenging this standard, from the recognition of harm in upholding the banking model of education, all the way to their standpoints on the topic altering from any experiences they may be a part of. In addition, my research discovers that certain verbal communication choices that tutors may utilize are able to carry out effects like a double-edged sword. Although in many cases it is well-intentioned, incorporating concepts like "we" language runs the harm of being "overly nice", limiting the potential of dialogic learning within student-tutor interactions because of capitalist politeness. The last theme my research recognizes was body language, and how nonverbal communication reflected the physical space in its roots to culture. Tutors and students who utilize body language inherently due to their cultural heritage, actively engage in linguistic and resistant capital to challenge power norms in academia. While my findings are critical expansions to previous research, I actively question how this may have looked in a bigger institution. How may have investigating a writing center that serves a bigger, wider student population in a longer time period than just a semester-long honors thesis compare to my current findings?

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Appendix: Interview Questions

General Questions:

- As a student or tutor, how is/was your experience at the Nevada State University Writing

  Center?

  - As a student/tutor, did your experience align with your initial thoughts about the

    physical space?

    - What were those initial thoughts you may have had?

Students:

- Do you see your tutor as an authority figure? Why or why not?

  - In what ways did they express this authority? Did they express it at all?

  - What language did they use to present themselves as an authoritative figure?

    What language was used to put you at ease in the session?

Tutors:

- Do you see yourself as an authoritative figure?

  - In what ways do you see yourself ease student discomfort in writing sessions?

  - Do you believe that your potential authoritative status is essential when it comes

    to sessions?

    - If not, how do you use language to even the power dynamics?

    - If yes, why is this the case? What are some benefits that may come along

      with it?