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Tutoring Philosophy

The Writing Center is a resource found within many universities that specifically seeks to serve writers and their writing. It employs undergraduate and graduate students to work individually with their peers as they attempt to improve their skills and craft outside of a traditional classroom setting. Or at least, this is how the Writing Center is defined in the simplest of terms. Despite this apparently straightforward mission, Writing Centers operate under the pressures of seemingly unsurmountable complexities. I believe they are tasked with the duty of aiding writers within the academic community, while using their unique position to challenge the implications of this discourse. This relies on both the Writing Center and the tutor's ability to transcend the norms of the academic discourse to recognize the multitude of literacies each student brings to the center, and to dismantle the hierarchies that dictate the practice of writing. The agents in this matter, the peer-tutors, are therefore called upon to create a supportive environment where knowledge is shared and created between peers under the philosophy of the center. Thus, to further explore these challenges, I will examine the implications of literacy, Writing Center and tutor philosophies, and the tutoring practice to better understand how to address the complexities faced by such a vital institution.

To understand the way in which individuals write, one must consider how they came to acquire their literacy. Typically, one learns to write in order to successfully function within their community. Thus, the individual comes to attain their literacy in accordance with the

expectations of this community, resulting in a wide array of literacies within our culture. However, as an individual comes to interact with multiple discourses, they seek to fulfill a multitude of literacies. This results in accumulation of literacy that, as Brandt suggests, "piles up and spreads out" over time. This is indicative of the perpetuating influence of both past expectations of literacies and our present demand for them; thus, creating an ideology of literacy that "has become more complex as more layers of earlier forms of literacy exist simultaneously within the society and within the experiences of individuals." (Brandt 652). On the individual level, this layering suggests that the writer does not merely shed one literacy for another but instead curates a multitude of literacies to shape their writing. However, what happens when a writer encounters a discourse community that devalues the literacies they have previously developed?

Normative understandings of literacy within a discourse often stem from a cultural hegemony, a system of power that is reflective of the values and demands of the community at hand. This hierarchy is rarely imposed from single authorities, but instead "has to be negotiated locally in the practices and procedures of everyday life." (Trimbur 280). As a result, expectations of literacy are imposed by the discourse community itself, creating a power structure that is strengthened by general acceptance from its members. Discourses then have the power to dictate the degree of literacy that is required to be successful within the given community, therefore challenging its members to chase this threshold. Thus, "ruling institutions [begin] to control literacy and use literacy to control the population." (Brandt 654), as a means of regulating the discourse. Within some dominant discourses, the individual must then assimilate to the standard of literacy, even when their previous equity of literacies does not equate with this norm. This is particularly true of academia and scholarship, as the discourse community seeks to hold all

members to their rigid notion of literacy, while some individuals may have greater access to it than others.

In the academic discourse, students are expected to adapt to the norms of literacy, despite what is understood about one's accumulation of multiple literacies. To do so, students are asked to suppress their knowledge from prior literacies to favor the academic discourse, therefore displacing the individual's experience. However, this is an injustice, as many students who are not born into dominant groups of literacy are further marginalized when they reach the academic institution. This is a result of their expression of an experience that challenges the dominant narrative in terms of identity, such as race, gender, and class. And given what we know about the cultural hegemony in play, the members of the discourse will fail to disrupt its hierarchies due to how deeply ingrained they have become. Thus, to address this issue, the Writing Center must utilize its unique position within the university to challenge the norms of the academic discourse and foster diverse student literacies.

Writing Centers provide a distinctive service within academia. They have the ability to function within the discourse while invoking a critical analysis of its functioning to address the injustices it imposes. Thus, it is essential that the Writing Center strives to teach the literacy of the academic discourse, while recognizing and advocating for deviation from its norms. This mission can be achieved by educating students about the practices of this discourse and illuminating their right to a choice of whether or not they want to adhere to them. Here, the Writing Center can position itself as an agent of change, where it can reform the normative practice by sharing its knowledge and empowering students by recognizing their autonomy within their writing. When doing so, Writing Centers can become "genuine spaces where students negotiate conflicts and where knowledge about the conflict among literacies can be

generated and shared." (Grimm 530). With this at the core of Writing Center philosophy, the Center can work alongside the academic discourse, while still calling upon its own mission to critique literacy inequities that displace students based on the widely-held belief that if "they use a non-dominant code they haven't mastered or don't know about the dominant code." (Grimm 545).

In practice, Writing Centers should impose their agency of change by first acknowledging the multitude of literacies an individual brings to the university. This is pertinent because one's literacy is often reflective of the "invisible borders to discourse communities" (Grimm 539), that compose an individual's identity. To do so, the Center should "[offer] students [and faculty] the opportunity for raising questions about how the categories of race, class, and gender are shaped within the margins and centers of power." (Condon 28); and how this is prevalent within the academic standards of literacy. Second, Writing Centers should work to make the knowledge of the discourse accessible to all students. This includes both how the academic discourse perceives and evaluates literacy, and how "its position [is] arbitrary, fluid, and subject to constant change." (Denny 73). By sharing this knowledge, the Writing Center becomes more accepting of an accumulation of literacy and challenges the overwhelming dominance of the academic literacy. When doing so, the Center is giving the individual a choice, where they can elect to defy the expectations of the discourse or adhere to them. However, it is essential that the Writing Center honor the student's choice, as most academic institutions still value the literacy of its discourse and students who deviate from it are often at risk of consequence or penalty. Helping students learn the dominant code is not problematic, but often necessary, when the student's goal is to be successful within the discourse. Yet, it is vital that we always provide them the knowledge to make that choice, and that the Writing Center serves as a

place that "fosters voice, agency, and critical understanding of discourse communities and institutional practices." (Denny 73), in the face of cultural hegemony.

To enact these philosophies, the Writing Center must employ peer-tutors to serve as the agents in their rectification of the academic discourse. To do so, tutors must be willing to work with their tutees in a manner that supports, educates, and aids students in reaching their writing goals, despite their literacy or familiarity with the discourse. As a tutor, I see tutoring as a means of breaking down academic hierarchies and creating a functional environment grounded in equality between the tutor and tutee. Therefore, I strive to serve a purpose that is unique to the Writing Center; one that brings students together under a collaboration of shared knowledge and challenges the notion that knowledge is a standard that must be reached. This is because I align myself with the concept of socially constructing knowledge through conversation, as knowledge is believed to be "an artifact created by a community of knowledgeable peers" (Bruffee 214). These philosophies are best represented through the collaborative theory of tutoring, as it emphasizes "knowledge as always contextually bound, as always socially constructed." (Lunsford 97). In addition, the collaborative model aids students in "confronting squarely the issues of control that successful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity." (Lunsford 97). Essentially, what this model relies on is the knowledge that is created within a conversation held by a tutor and tutee, both of whom bring different knowledge and literacies and leave with more than they started with. And most importantly, it is this conversation that brings about an opportunity to enact change regarding the academic hierarchies at play.

When I enter a tutoring session, I know that both the tutee and myself will bring individual sets of knowledge to a session, as we each hold our own multitude of literacies.

Typically, I consciously bring a general knowledge of the academic discourse, my own experiences regarding the writing process, and the empowerment I have gained from recognizing the dominant system at hand and my available choice to disregard it. Unconsciously, I try to stow away my own literacies and identities that come with my race, gender, and socioeconomic class, however, they can never truly leave me. The tutee then enters the Writing Center with their own set of unique literacies, all relevant to their academic and writing experience. It is then my job to construct an "environment that rejects traditional hierarchies." (Lunsford 95). To do so, it is vital to ensure that both the tutee and myself hold an equal part within the session. When this happens, our conversation becomes a passing of knowledge; where I seek to share my knowledge regarding the discourse constructs, one's ability to deviate from them, and the potential consequences that may follow. My tutee then further educates me on the experiences that have led them to their accumulation of literacy, and how they want to use it in their interaction with this discourse. This experience calls on me, as a peer more than a tutor, to have a "willingness to listen deeply, compassionately – even, especially, when what one hears hurts" (Condon 32), to be able to have a conversation that constructs knowledge around marginalized literacies. From these conversations, the tutee educates me about their experiences and how inequities play out within our discourse community, thus fueling my desire to challenge them within my sessions. Therefore, in a session, I seek to share the critical literacy I gained from the Writing Center's philosophy to present my peers with a choice they did not know they had; one that allows them to use their accumulation of literacy, despite the norms of the academic discourse.

However, just because a tutee is presented with this choice does not ensure that they will take it. One instance I've encountered was during an online session I had with an ESL student who was looking to do some proof-reading. She continuously asked me to read her work and tell

her what "mistakes" needed to be fixed. While reading the piece, I found a few minor errors in her execution of Standard American English, but none of them skewed my reading or left me feeling confused. So, when I finished reading, I began to talk to her about how I had noticed a few minor mistakes in grammar or word choice, but that they didn't affect my reading in the slightest. I wanted her to understand that her language barrier in no way infringed upon what she was trying to say, and that if she did not want to sound American, it was okay to leave the mistakes. But before I could reach a conversation where we discussed the implications of that choice, she was quick to tell me that she wanted it to be "perfect". This instance frustrated me, as I was disappointed that our discourse was so domineering that is came to impose standards of perfection among those who were disadvantaged due to diverse literacies. I didn't want my tutee to feel as though she had to take an assimilationist stance, where "differences [are read] as deficiencies." (Cox, Matsuda 45). Yet, as a tutor my job is to provide the choice, not to make it, so I set about helping my tutee learn the norms of the discourse. And while this was initially frustrating to me, I was appreciative of our conversation nonetheless; because when learning about the desires and experiences of my tutee, not as a tutor but as a peer, it became clear to me that for some, their goal is not to disrupt the system but to conquer it. Fortunately, my philosophy and the philosophy of the Writing Center allows me to aid students in doing both.

While that session was structured around a productive conversation, I have not been as successful in some of my previous attempts. Before I had a strong grasp on my own philosophy, I often failed to implement the collaborative model effectively within my practice. One afternoon I had two consecutive sessions that brought identical prompts from a college writing class. In my first session, the tutee hadn't even begun the writing process. He had a series of sources that he had complied through previous assignments and a vague idea of what he wanted to write about,

but not much else. At the time, I felt as though my tutee had come in ill-prepared, and thought it would be a disadvantage in the session. However, looking back I realize I should have been more considerate of the tutee's literacy. I needed to construct a conversation that addressed his knowledge of the discourse by asking more questions about his relationship with the assignment and the discourse, rather than focusing solely on the task at hand. Due to the absence of this conversation, the session proceeded without the virtues of collaboration and failed to be as productive as it could have been had I been more receptive to the student's needs. The following appointment was completely different. The tutee was further along in the writing process and seemed to have a good understanding of what she wanted from the session. She appeared to have a more developed academic literacy and we could easily engage in a conversation equally and collaboratively. The comparison of these two sessions can be representative of the academic discourse at large; as I perceived the first student to be less prepared than the second student and allowed that notion to dictate the appointment. Instead, I should have engaged the first student in a productive conversation about literacy and the academic discourse before addressing the writing itself to produce a session that was as productive as the second.

In summation, I have concluded that the goal of peer tutoring is grounded in the bilateral sharing of knowledge and empowerment between two peers under the philosophy of the Writing Center. Through these conversations, tutors can aim to share their knowledge regarding the choice one has within the academic discourse to increase the expression and understanding of the individual accumulation of literacy. And while this may not be achievable, or necessary, in all tutoring sessions; its philosophy should guide the endeavors of the Writing Center and the practices of the tutor. For the Writing Center's unique position within the academic discourse gives it the opportunity to disrupt the cultural hegemony that perpetuates the reign of these

systems. With this mission the center can facilitate conversations about identity and voice within the practice of writing to better our discourse community. Thus, as I continue developing my practice, I hope to employ my agency for change to gradually challenge the normative culture surrounding academics, literacy, and writing as both a peer and a tutor.

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