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Mad Man in the Writing Center: Why Don Draper and I have a lot in common

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by **Mark Thomas**, James Madison University

Don Draper is the tall, dark, and handsome lead character on the cable TV series *Mad Men*. I, on the other hand, am short, very white, and average looking, except as I mentioned, I am extremely white. Pale. *Tres blanc*. I am so white that a friend once described me as translucent. In the right light, and from a particular angle, you can see through me. That leads me back to how Don Draper and I are alike.

For those of you unfamiliar with *Mad Men*, the Madison Avenue ad executive ostensibly called Donald Draper is actually an imposter named Dick Whitman, who stole the dog tags from a dead fellow soldier in Korea and assumed his identity. I was watching the finale of season four when the parallel hit me. Tutoring in writing has shown me my double life.

Draper and I both live double lives. Like Don, I have created an alternative version of myself, the version that tutors individuals in the writing center. It's a different self from the one my students see in class. I'm one person in the writing center and another in the classroom. Duplicity is what the mad man and I have in common.

In Don's case, the result is a lot of dramatic irony. The show's arch-historical setting highlights its frame and its artifice; but the layering of character also reveals that, as I said, Draper is surrounded by people who have their own secrets. He's constantly being surprised by what he doesn't know about those around him. Take his new fiancée, Megan, for example. When she telephones her mother with news of their engagement, their conversation *en francais* shocks Don with how little he knows about the woman he just proposed to.

To wrap up the series' fourth season, creator/writer/director Matthew Weiner closes with a shot of Don lying in bed with Megan. Don looks past his bedside clock towards the window, and the 1965 Sonny & Cher hit "I Got You, Babe" begins to play. By closing the season, in an episode titled "Tomorrowland," with this visual and auditory pun alluding to the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, I think Weiner underlines that Don is repeating earlier mistakes, even while trying to change his life.

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Teacher. In the classroom my statements are meant for public consumption and, usually, for general application. For example, when I speak to my classes I look around, as if I could encompass the group with my gestures, while watching for signs that I might need to rephrase for anyone in the room. I try to address the concerns of an average student. But, sometimes I wind up addressing no one present because there is no one average student.

In the classroom I confront multiple subjectivities. And, while the students in my classes have a lot in common with each other, each one of them is unique in his or her agenda and relative interest or desire for learning or writing in particular.

I also have to evaluate my students with grades. That doesn't happen in tutoring, which means that the tutor is much more of an ally than a potential foe. Teaching entails more authority and responsibility than tutoring. (In a tutoring session, those qualities are negotiated and shared between the tutor and tutee). Teaching a required, general education course such as freshman composition means I face a range of interests, attitudes, and aptitudes in every class. For some students, the most important outcome from the course is their grade. A number of them, however, are motivated by the growing awareness of how much writing will characterize their professional lives.

In the writing center, in an intensive consultation with a tutor, the student is encouraged to set the agenda. The student's interest and engagement is usually high, and his motivation and hunger to write better is an important element of difference. Remember, students in the writing center self-select; they choose to be there, carving time out of their schedules for these sessions. Having given up some of their own free time, they value their time in the writing center.

In tutoring, the relationship that develops between tutor and tutee is usually positively collaborative because each one sees his separate and combined efforts to achieve overlapping goals. The writer's primary concern is with a particular document; the tutor tries to help the writer learn something—whether about the writing process, research, rereading, or argumentation—that helps her or him complete the document.

There's also the duration of the interaction. Among tutors, it is commonplace that each session is different from the others. For teachers, each semester offers a similar fresh start. I remember being frustrated by semesters as a student. It seemed that many classes only addressed were just reaching the most interesting material at the end of the semester. Now, I see that was by design. I think teachers, more than students, benefit from having a fresh start every four or five months. Tutors, however, may be reborn at the top of each hour.

Just as the characteristics of a class depend on the students, each tutoring session depends on the writer. This brings me back to the quality of one-on-one transactions. Tutoring means working with one person. For a short while I ally myself with an individual (or a small group of writers, for collaborative writing projects). In our alliance, the writer and I inwardly assess each other. While outwardly we express our hopes and expectations, and work reciprocally toward a shared goal.

When my fellowship at **James Madison University's writing center** began last year, many new opportunities opened up. The people I work with are individually and collectively impressive professionals, dedicated to helping students become better writers. As I prepare for my own Tomorrowland, what can I suggest that would help the next writing fellow to do more than bask in the writing center's reflected glory? The faculty member lucky enough to become the next writing fellow for the writing center will have plenty to do, keeping up with the cadre of undergraduate tutors who share their talents with others and spread the good work in new sites around our campus.

Now that I can see the end of my fellowship in the writing center, I have learned by meeting one-on-one with roughly three hundred **JMU** students that each one is different. Some need only a little help or encouragement to develop their writing further, while others, perhaps initially shy from having been told that they are not good writers, deserve a clean slate, a fresh set of friendly eyes, and a chance to remake themselves through education, through their writing. That's what the writing center offers.

Where would Don Draper and I be without second chances?

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