

EQUITY AND ABILITY: METAPHORS OF INCLUSION IN WRITING CENTER PROMOTION

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As I promote the services that our writing center offers to faculty members across disciplines, I always try to be careful of the language I use to discuss exactly what it is we do in our writing center. I know the perceptions: *the writing center will help you with your grammar* or *the writing center will help you fix your paper*. Our goal, I try to emphasize to faculty members, is not to help your students fix their papers; our goal is to help them become better writers.

The way these two ideals contradict one another is not always apparently obvious to an individual not steeped in the scholarship of composition or writing center theory. Those of us who work with first year writers or in the writing center know that the metaphor invoked in the phrase “my writing needs to be fixed” is one that is inaccurate at best and crushing at worst; in fact, a student’s writing is not something that is broken. And even if the writing appears to convey a student’s gaps in knowledge regarding composition, we do not want our writing centers to be viewed as places where those with splintered skills receive a sort of diagnosis and prescription.

If the writing center were to resemble any part of the health professions, it would mirror the more egalitarian relationship held by a client and therapist than it would a patient and surgeon. Bones can be broken, but minds, of course, **cannot**.

The students who enter our writing centers, though, do often feel as if their writing is **hardly without gaps, if not broken**. The students who feel the weight of this disparagement are ones that we would often categorize as basic writers. Of course, as David Bartholomae notes with regards to the basic writer in his landmark “The Study of Error,” “basic writers do not, in general, write ‘immature’ sentences. [...] In fact they often attempt syntax whose surface is more complex

than that of more successful freshman writers” (254). These students who receive the label of basic writers, who are sentenced frequently to making an appointment at the writing center (as if it were some sort of punishment), are in many ways succeeding at their own writing in ways that are less privileged, and thus less acknowledged. These students are often more creative, crafting complicated syntax in their compositions, than their praised, play-it-safe peers.

Of course, these basic writers do need help with writing (and, I may add, that if writing is a way of knowing and doing, as Michael Carter postulates, then their peers, and all of us, for that matter, need help, too: because who can ever say that they perfectly *know*, *do*, and thus, *write*). Bartholomae does advocate the usage of error analysis as “a method of diagnosis” in the composition classroom (258). That analysis, though, can happen in ways that are much more intimate and personal in the writing center than it could in a classroom filled with rows of students.

Part of what makes the ethos of a writing center more equitable is how its function differs from that of a classroom. In Peter Carino’s “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History,” a significant distinction is made between the function of a writing center and the function of a classroom. Although the model for the writing center is based upon the laboratory method, a method that allowed for more individual instruction (Carino 12), the atmosphere for the writing center is much different than the atmosphere for the classroom. One of the most notable differences is that of authoritarian roles. In the traditional model for the classroom, the teacher is the individual who possesses the most knowledge concerning a particular subject. The students, likewise, are to be receivers of the teacher’s knowledge. The writing center, and the atmosphere in the writing center,

should not be like that of a traditional classroom. In fact, the tutor-tutee relationship should be similar to a peer relationship. Carino states, “sensitivity to individual students’ needs and [...] willingness to abdicate some teacherly authority prefigure much of what is valued in writing center tutors today” (18).

In the same vein, Elizabeth Boquet’s “‘Our Little Secret’: A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions” talks about techniques tutors can learn in order to help students in a more open, peer-to-peer relationship. Boquet makes a distinction between “working with consultants” (42) as opposed to working for consultants. According to Dr. Mariann Regan, one of the best ways to work with a student involves “questioning the student” (42). Through guided questioning, which leads to conversation, the student not only develops knowledge about how to go about the writing process **alone**, but also gains the confidence to do so.

And developing knowledge of the writing process is a fundamental goal of our writing centers; learning about the writing process is what allows us to help students become better writers, rather than just fix their papers. As Mina Shaughnessy notes in *Errors and Expectations*, the writer with basic skills is not simply a writer who lacks particular skills and is apprehensive, but is skeptical of the writing process as a whole. Shaughnessy states that this particular individual may feel that anyone in a position of evaluating writing is simply “searching for flaws” (7). This state of mind creates an environment that is not open to idea exploration and general creativity. Debunking the myth that the writing center is only where broken writers go and dispelling the idea that our tutors are searching for flaws rather than conversing about composition are crucial to the climate and mission of the writing center. The way we craft the narrative about our centers implicitly affects the quality of writing that emerges from our sessions. Actively resisting metaphors of debility as we promote our centers across campus aids in helping *all* writers, basic or advanced, succeed.

Works Cited

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