

WHO WE ARE AND WHY IT MATTERS: THE UNIQUE IDENTITY OF THE BRONX COMMUNITY COLLEGE WRITING CENTER

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[Editors' Note: The video to which this column refers is freely available at praxisuwc.com.]

The Bronx Community College Writing Center community is an eclectic mix of races, religions, cultures, and interests. Our tutors and staff are former or current BCC students. They are foreign nationals or have lived or traveled around the world; they speak languages from every corner of the earth—Spanish, French, Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, Twi, English, and Patwa. They are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Atheist, and Agnostic. They are equally academically diverse, with degrees ranging from bachelor's to master's and majors in Business, Education, Psychology, Social Work, Physics, Creative Writing, and English. These significant differences might easily divide any other community, yet the BCC Writing Center staff instead celebrates its diversity with a unique, familial, and welcoming camaraderie. The Bronx Community College Writing Center film project *Who We Are* explores how this is possible through reflections of the BCC Writing Center staff on their work at the writing center and the ways that eclectic mix is addressed with still another question in mind—does diversity matter? The tutors offer reflections of the impact of their differences on each other and their work, as well as their perceptions of the diverse identities of our institution's demographic.

Background

The site of a Revolutionary War battle, Bronx Community College sits on top of one of the highest natural elevations in the city of New York. Architect Stanford White designed the campus in 1890 to house New York University's uptown undergraduate School of Engineering. Its elegant architecture includes the well-known Hall of Fame for Great Americans and the ornate Gould Memorial Library, which is modeled after the Pantheon in Rome and boasts an 18-karat, gold-leaf ceiling.

Amidst this rich historical background, Bronx Community College today serves a population of over 11,000 students from a veritable United Nations of multicultural backgrounds, including the United States,

West Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Europe, the Caribbean, and South America.

Students bring their writing to our writing center from courses across the disciplines. Their writing reflects perspectives formed through the lens of their diverse worldviews and languages, intensified by their complicated lives—balancing full-time jobs, parenting, and attending school. Some express a curiosity and hunger to understand concepts in American culture or to connect newly learned ideas with their pasts. One student asked, “What does ‘student activities’ mean? What are student activities?” A West African student shared how her rural village culture's beliefs had taught her that witchcraft had caused her twelve-year-old brother's fatal heart attack. She wrote about her new understanding of coronary artery disease. Our students have stories to tell us through their writing. The Bronx Community College Writing Center tutors must have a passionate interest in understanding what BCC students want to write about. The tutors must have empathy and the ability to listen. They do.

Who We Are

The film interview project began with a set of twelve interview questions, generated to elicit responses from nineteen tutors and staff. Each interviewee was filmed separately and asked the same set of questions. They did not have the questions ahead of time, nor did they prepare their answers or coach each other on what to say. They were given unlimited time to speak.

Of the nineteen interviewed, three were Asians (two Pakistani and one Bangladeshi), one Ghanaian, two white American-born (one of whom was raised in Zambia), one biracial Iranian-American, one biracial Indian-American, two African American, one Haitian-American, three Jamaican, one Trinidadian, and four Dominican. They were asked about their countries of origin, the languages they were raised speaking, and other countries they had visited. They were also asked to reflect on the diversity of our writing center, what they have learned from working in it, and in which ways their cultural backgrounds have impacted their work.

They were also given the opportunity to sing, play an instrument, or recite poetry. Music is another language, another form of diversity. We filmed Daniel Tehrani playing setar and drums, Corey Spencer and Stefan Nunez reciting original spoken word pieces, and Penelope Meyers playing the flute.

The editing process of the film eliminated segments that did not provide information relevant to the question being explored. Responses were grouped into the categories shown in the film, the most compelling responses surviving the cut. Out of the interviews emerges the unique identity of the BCC Writing Center—who we are.

What is most remarkable is that although they were interviewed separately, many observations are almost identical. Every interviewee comments on the ability of everyone in the center to get along with each other despite their varied cultural backgrounds. They seem to feel that it is partly because of their cultural differences that they are very interested in learning about each other, and that seems to strengthen their friendships.

They all say they love working in such a diverse environment and have learned so much from each other. They are impressed with each other's customs and knowledge of other languages and say working together inspires them to learn each other's languages. Tutor Sam Kimball notes that he always has questions, such as, "How do you say this in Farsi? Or that in Urdu or Spanish?" (*Who We Are*, unedited version). Not a single respondent says that diversity doesn't matter; rather, it enhances their love of and commitment to each other and their work.

"Diversity?" asks a tutor named Britney Francis. "I could tell you that for lunch time! We have curry, plantains, *arroz*, pizza, special desserts . . ." (*Who We Are*, unedited version). Yet there is more. Besides languages, music, and traditional dishes, they each bring unique values to the cultural mix, values such as a fierce appreciation and "value for education" taught in Jamaica (Assistant Director Kenisha Thomas, *Who We Are*), or "extreme politeness" taught to children in Ghana (Receptionist Rejoice Nanor, *Who We Are*, unedited version). We are a *cazuela*, a cultural stew.

However, as tutor Betty Doyle points out, "We are extremely interested in our differences, but we are blown away with our similarities because we are so much alike" in personalities, interests in relationship struggles, careers, hopes and dreams, but also writing, art, music, science, poetry, politics, religion, and—of course—food (*Who We Are*)!

They all express pride and amazement at the smooth operation of our writing center. They joyfully claim, "We all just seem to fit together" (Doyle and

Thomas)! "Even though we are diverse, we all get along really well" (Nunez, *Who We Are*, unedited version). The writing center—a safe place for freedom of expression and exploration of unique, unusual ideas—is the great equalizer.

Why It Matters

In a survey of university writing centers in the Northeast of twelve responding colleges, seven indicate that their campus is 90% white and that they wish it were more diverse. Most agree that diversity does matter because it helps bring about a greater understanding of others. However, some argue that the diversity of a writing center staff shouldn't be an issue because tutoring, by its very definition, requires connecting to others on a universal human level (*NEWCA 2013 Survey*). Is it important to be able to look past race, ethnicity, or other diversities? Writing centers that are not ethnically diverse undoubtedly share the same collaborative culture as the Bronx Community College Writing Center. Therefore, the question remains: Does diversity matter?

The BCC tutors all acknowledge the importance of collaborative culture in a writing center when they speak about the patience and non-judgmental acceptance they learned in "creating an environment where knowledge can be found," as tutor Corey Spencer observes (*Who We Are*). Tutor Shazia Khan suggests, "Teaching and learning is give and take. I can teach something or I can learn something from a student" (*Who We Are*, unedited version).

However, the BCC Writing Center tutors, without exception, all argue that diversity helps to better serve the students by creating a safe environment, "an environment of acceptance," as Doyle notes about age diversity and the needs of older students (*Who We Are*). Tutor Noman Jalal observes that his background helped him to explain things to a Bangladeshi student in ways that another tutor, not from his culture, could not (*Who We Are*). Diversity helps create a feeling of comfort for students of varying backgrounds who come to the writing center. Tutor Aisha Sidibe reflects, "Students come to the writing center feeling very afraid, and it helps to see someone from the same background as you" (*Who We Are*).

Similar conclusions could certainly be drawn by anyone in any writing center anywhere. Even for writing centers that are less ethnically and racially diverse, there are so many other kinds of diversity to consider—age, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, to name a few.

The interviews with the Bronx Community College tutors and staff reveal their deep understanding and

love of the diverse environment in which they work, the haven it provides, and the population who depend upon its services for support with their writing. Jalal muses, “Wherever I will go, I will have this experience of the writing center in my mind because it has changed my life” (*Who We Are*).

The picture of a true learning community emerges in the film’s depiction of the ongoing give and take of teaching and learning. We have included the film as part of our introduction to the writing center for scheduled tours of classes. The students and faculty see the tutors’ commitment, caring, and humility. They have commented that it makes them feel welcome and that some of their misgivings have fallen away.

Therefore, in creating communities of acceptance in our writing centers, is it looking past differences or embracing them that makes for excellent tutoring? The story of migration from one geographical location to another is part of the tapestry of human history. Our planet is increasingly globally accessible. There is an abundance of opportunity and a dire, growing need to learn from and about each other. As tutor Miguel Gil says, “In sharing our diversity, we acquire greater diversity by sharing who we are” (*Who We Are*).

Still, writing centers everywhere do share the commonality of a collaborative, accepting, and inclusive culture; and indeed, we must see not only the differences but also the universal humanity of all who enter our centers. If the tutors are learning that, then even those who are working in less diverse environments will be better prepared for the day when they find themselves in the global and ethnic mix all nations are becoming—the day they realize, as the BCC tutors have learned, that “in relating with others, in relating with the world, we find out who we are” (Gil, *Who We Are*). Without a doubt, that day will come.

Works Cited

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