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Negotiating Authority: Perceptions of Age in the Writing Center

[Spring 2011/Consulting](#)

by **Courtney L. Werner**, *Kent State University*

From 2003 to 2006, I worked as a writing center tutor at a small, private, liberal arts college. I was the "traditional" college student while I worked at the writing center: I was between the ages of 19 and 22 and a middle-class Caucasian woman. During my three years working as a tutor at the Moravian College and Theological Seminary Writing Center, other tutors and I faced our biggest challenges while working with Moravian Seminary students—graduate students at the seminary studying to become affiliated with the Moravian Church. These students were typically many years older than the tutors. As younger tutors, we often felt that these older student-writers did not value our input on their writing.

Although there were many conflicts between writing center tutors and seminary students, tutors often lumped all conflicts under the heading of "age conflict." However, it is clear to me now that there was more going on, more contact zones interacting, than what was on the surface. Seminary students, though typically older, were often international students; their identities and habits during the conference were complicated by ethnicity, race, culture, religious beliefs, and age. Being younger, inexperienced, traditional college students from middle- to upper-class backgrounds, we felt all of the conflicts resulted from age differences because at the time we could not fathom what else would cause them. When I took a graduate position at Texas State University, it became that clear age influenced writing tutorials differently at various writing centers.

Non-traditional students – students who are 23+ – constitute 42.14% of the overall student population at Texas State, and the number is consistently increasing. 183 non-traditional students visited the writing center between January 13, 2008 and March 19, 2008 out of a total of 500 students, marking the demographic as an important clientele.

This project—a limited case study—examines the tutorial process as a negotiation of authority, especially where age is concerned. I ask whether the age-related contact zone is a significant influence in writing center

tutorials. To answer this question, I designed a preliminary survey to distribute to the writing center tutors and conducted interviews with four survey respondents. Though I limit my current discussion to the interview findings, I argue age differences during a writing center tutorial session sometimes impede or strengthen a tutor's ability to connect with a writer as peers. Because becoming peers is integral to a quality conference session where writers learn about their writing and critically examine ways to enhance their

Is the age-related contact zone a significant influence in writing center tutorials?

writing. The ability to connect with a tutor, to become peers with the tutor, affects the writing process. I argue stereotyping non-traditional students, denying the impact of age in the writing center, and working to build a peer relationship are three phenomena writing center staff and researchers must critically examine in order to meet the needs of expanding student demographics on college campuses.

A word about my case study participants: the original surveys were distributed to all the Texas State Writing Center tutors, and all tutors were given the opportunity to volunteer for follow-up interviews. Tutors voluntarily filled out the survey and returned them anonymously to me via a drop box located in the writing center. Tutors who were willing to engage in follow up interviews indicated their interest on the survey along with their contact information. Six tutors responded, but I was only able to schedule interviews with four. Roughly 73% or eight out of eleven survey-respondents are non-traditional student-tutors while only 27% (three tutors) are traditional student-tutors. 64% (seven) survey-participants are female, while 37% (four) are male. The ratio of male to female participants reflects the demographics of the writing center, where the ratio is sixteen female to six males (8:3). Of the tutors I interviewed, three are traditional-age students and one (Keri) is non-traditional age. All interviewed tutors are female.

Stereotyping the Non-Traditional Student

"Non-traditional students are less wary of just telling me exactly what they think," says Dayna. According to Ryane, "If anyone's going to argue with me about something, or I guess disagree with something that I say, it's usually them." Keri says, "By the time that you get into your 30s and 40s, you develop habits." Ashly feels, "non-traditional students who come to the writing center are more motivated because they're deciding to come back to school."

Each above quotation describes a stereotype about non-traditional students: non-traditional students can be blunt and demanding of respect and equality; age-related seniority exists; non-traditional students can be more resistant to tutors' suggestions; and non-traditional students are more motivated than other students.

These overlapping themes can be broken down into three basic stereotypes: non-traditional students have more life experience than traditional students, they command more respect and authority in a tutorial, and non-traditional students are more set in their writing habits. In one respect, each of these stereotypes shows non-traditional students taking control over tutorials to increase the quality of the tutorial for themselves. In another respect, non-traditional students' actions lead tutors to feel sessions have a lower quality because of a lack of peer equality. Keeping these stereotypes in mind, I examine how these tutors negotiate becoming peers with non-traditional students.

Denying Age

Tutors often feel non-traditional student-writers are no different than traditional students. Based on the surveys and interviews, age did not originally register as a significant factor for tutors in determining tutorial success. Identity is often crucial to a person's writing process, as many theorists (see Villanueva; Grimm) point out. Therefore, when Ashly told me that she does not think demographic factors affect tutorials because the most important factor is "whether or not

[students have] been forced to come" to the center, and she felt "[those things aren't] really related to the other factors that were asked about [on the survey]," I was skeptical. However, three of the four tutors I interviewed purported similar views.

For Keri, the survey brought touchy subjects to the surface: "I actually talked to other tutors and said, 'Is this real? Are there really differences?' And they gave me some of their examples. I went back and really thought about it." Keri came to see that there are both differences and similarities between non-traditional and traditional student-writers. It was apparent, though, that she had never stopped to think before—never needed to think—about how people's differences affect tutor-student interaction. Keri says that when she began taking the survey, she thought she was just tutoring people—no real difference between them. When she finished, though, her opinion moved beyond "we're all equal."

Ashly, though, remained resistant. When asked how her approach to a session might change when she realized the student-writer she would be working with was a non-traditional student, Ashly said nothing would change. Her tutorial ritual would say the same, and age would not register as a factor in her thought process about the student or her writing. Ashly denies that writing center sessions might be affected by the writer's age. At the end of our interview, she told me, "a lot of people who are older than me tend to judge me a little more because it's so apparent that I'm younger than them. I'm starting to see it more and more." Ashly did not see a connection between how older people might judge her and the ways non-traditional students might treat her within the confines of the tutorial session.

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Even if age had eventually become a blip on writing center tutors' factors-affecting-the-session radar, tutors did not see age as problematic or complex when they first began to tutor. Ryane describes her first tutorial session with a non-traditional student-writer as awkward because she did not expect to encounter older students. Unlike Ryane,

Dayna had the initial denial evidenced in both Keri and Ashly's comments.

When I asked why she choose to list age as the second most important factor in determining success of the tutorial on the survey, she responded, "Sex/gender, really doesn't matter. Religions? I hardly ever find out what religion a person is when they come in, unless they have some kind of obvious markings [...]. Sexual orientation—something I usually don't know. So it really came down to race and age, so those are really the only two things that affect me."

Dayna gave much thought to what aspects of a student-writer's identity contribute to or impede an ability to become peers, ranking race and age as most likely to affect the tutorial.

Becoming Peers

A final theme emerging from the surveys and interviews is the process of becoming peers. Keri, Ashly, Ryane, and Dayna struggle with concept of being peers with non-traditional student-writers. The tutors take different stances in terms of identifying with non-traditional students as peers. Two identify strongly with these students while two feel they are at a disadvantage when interacting with non-traditional students on a peer-to-peer level.

For Keri, there is a sense of real peer collaboration with non-traditional student-writers that she does not have with traditional students. She says she experienced “camaraderie” with one particular non-traditional student writer and has the same feeling with others. Keri also says, “when I see an older person, I have a level of compassion” because of their common ground as returning students. Keri relates to non-traditional student writers and admittedly projects her own experiences onto them: an effort that allows her to engage as peers with non-traditional.

Ashly, too, comments on the idea of being peers when she discusses community building with non-traditional tutors. She says she wanted one particular non-traditional student-writer she worked with to “know that I knew the place that she was in, that I could share with her that, and that I could help her through that if she ever wanted to come back and see me about anything.” Ashly, however, does not simply encourage community by inviting student-writers to come back to the writing center, she builds bridges by introducing her non-traditional student classmates to the writing center as a place that caters to them. She describes telling one classmate to come to the writing center to use the microwave—a sure way to build community with a non-traditional student looking for the scarce commodity of a microwave to heat up her dinner on campus.

For Dayna, on the other hand, there is a lesser degree of peer equity with non-traditional student writers. Dayna says she is “definitely intimidated by” non-traditional student writers and that she is “just a little bit more wary than if it was just a regular student” and has anxiety about working with non-traditional student-writers, a comment suggesting effective peer collaboration relies on many factors including age.

Ryane also struggles to become peers with non-traditional student-writers. She claims that tutoring an older student is a role reversal with little room for the consideration of peer equity due to “people my parents’ age, and having some twenty-something tell them [...] how to work on their paper. [...]. It’s a backwards role for both parties.” Ryane’s comments suggest she definitely feels the role reversal; Ryane cannot find common ground with these student-writers, nor can she be their peer while she worries about negotiating such a role reversal—the opposite of many teacherly settings.

Although this piece does not speak to all writing centers or tutors, as the number of non-traditional students increases on college campuses, the number of writing center visits by these students also increases. Preliminary findings suggest age-related contact zones affect tutors’ perceptions of the non-traditional students they work with. Tutors may at first be resistant to the idea that age affects tutorials at all, but the effect is still there. If tutors do not necessarily “see” writers’ ages, then they think age does not affect tutorials; however, this is not the case. Because all pieces of writers’ identities affect their interactions with other writers (or tutors), and especially because tutors are more likely to initially deny writers’ ages as a factor in tutorial sessions, age-related contact zones in writing centers need more attention than they have previously been given.

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