

CRITIQUING THE CENTER: THE ROLE OF TUTOR EVALUATIONS IN AN OPEN ADMISSIONS WRITING CENTER

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Though created to give its inhabitants the feeling of comfort, structure, and control, suburbia has been co-opted by postmodernists seeking to crack its modernist façade to reveal the hybridity, fragmentation, and hegemony at its commodified heart (Silverstone). The in-between-ness of suburbia, that liminal zone between the country and the city, has its academic counterpart in the writing center, a complex site of social, material, and discursive relations that construct experiences on all levels of academic life. Like the suburb, a writing center can be seen as an example of Edward Soja's "third space," a part of institutional geography, yet located at a crossroads of many different, overlapping, and conflicting rhetorical and ideological ecosystems. Long Island, New York is the birthplace of the suburb and so its promises of luxury, centrality, and ease inform the lives of Long Islanders, young and old. The Suffolk County Community College Writing Center services the biggest community college on Long Island, with 25,000 students enrolled; the Writing Center sees about 2,000 of these students every semester.

My purpose for this article is twofold: to discuss the SCCC tutor evaluation process and to question what happens when the results of an evaluation fly in the face of present scholarship and negate current conceptions and perceptions of postmodern writing centers. As an open admissions commuter school bursting with diversity, SCCC seems like the poster child for postmodern existence amongst the suburban sprawl of Long Island, New York, and yet students using and dwelling in the writing center seem to be seeking shelter from the demands of a postmodern world. At our community college, the Writing Center is often utilized as a way-station between classes, jobs, and other obligations for our suburban students, thus increasing the traffic through our door. Attending a commuter school, the writing center is a place, a kind of educational and social suburb, where students could find some stable bearing in the midst of the frenzied activities that make up twenty-first century living on Long Island.

Though the SCCC Writing Center has been open since the early 1990's, the high volume of students and

the demands placed on the tutors had left little time for reflection on theory or practice. On becoming coordinator in August of 2008, and at the risk of being hated from the moment I walked in the door, I decided to implement a brief evaluation form to better gauge (outside of anecdotal information) how the tutors were performing and if we were actually meeting the needs of our clients. Previous to the evaluation system, tutors (I included) assumed that we were satisfying the composing demands of our constituency; what we did not realize was that our students had many other needs, most outside of writing and assignments, that had more to do with spatial and social presence, location, and "centering" within the institutional and physical geography of the college.

In the fall of 2008, the SCCC Writing Center instituted an evaluation form to assess how effective tutors were in meeting student needs and to reflect on tutor practices. The tutor evaluations shed light on not only what students needed from our writing center but what they were not getting from their college experience. The respondents' need for a safe, comfortable, and secure "place," a material, centralized area where they could find some stability in their displaced lives, calls into question the notion that writing centers are spaces of multiplicity, fluidity, and transitional subjectivities (Grimm, Owens, Bouquet and Learner). As the cultural and economic dreams of suburbia seem to be fading away for these community college students, the yearning for a stable, unambiguous space is often projected onto our writing center.

Several spatial compositionists, such as Johnathon Mauk, perceive "traditional academic space" as becoming fragmented, disrupted, and "place-less" by the movement away from campus of different kinds of students with different academic needs and off-campus commitments who cannot locate themselves physically, socially, or discursively in traditional composition classrooms. Writing centers themselves have been discussed and imagined as "in-between places," occupying "a liminal zone operating somewhere between the 'native' language practices of their clientele and the discursive demands of the

academy” (Owens 73). Much has been written on how writing centers can help or hinder this negotiation of instructor expectations and student voice and yet our evaluations displayed anxiety over a different, though related, negotiation involving space and place. Students, whether residential or commuter, still have to interact significantly with some aspect of college geography, places and spaces that, far from being “discursive vacuums” (Mauk 371), have a profound effect on the spatial, social, and rhetorical strategies utilized by students not only composing for a writing class but also in constructing identities that encompass many different spatial-socio-discursive experiences (not only the academic ones).

The Evaluations

Beginning in August 2008, the SCCC Writing Center instituted a post-session evaluation. This evaluation was created and implemented in order to encourage reflection on tutor practice, assess how effective tutors were in addressing student needs, and to try to understand how tutors are perceived by students in terms of specific practices, areas of focus, and behaviors deemed “helpful.” The central research questions addressed by the evaluations were what do students want out of sessions and are they getting it from tutors. The evaluation also sought to gauge the probability of students returning to the writing center and at what frequency.

For the Fall 2008 semester, 304 evaluations were collected by the entire writing center staff: 8 Professional Assistants (adjunct faculty that work part time at the writing center), 5 student tutors, and a coordinator. The evaluation sheet was given to students at the end of a tutoring session. Students were asked to fill out the sheet in the writing center. A box was used to collect the evaluations, and the coordinator would collect the evaluations three times a week, read them, and put them in the corresponding tutor’s mailbox. The tutor would read the evaluation and return them to the coordinator.

The evaluation sheet consisted of four questions, a combination of open-ended and Likert scale questions based on a previous evaluation form I had used in previous work at the University of Rhode Island’s writing center.

The questions were as follows:

1. What was the most useful part of the session for you today?
2. How helpful was the tutor/consultant you worked with?
Not Helpful
Somewhat Helpful

- Very Helpful
Why?
3. How likely are you to return to the Writing Center to work on this or other writing projects?
Not Likely
Somewhat Likely
Very Likely
Why?
 4. Any suggestions for improvement or final comments about your experience?

Responses to Questions

The most common written comments focused on the following topics:

- Editing and Proofreading
- Citations/Bibliography (MLA and APA formats)
- Thesis statement
- Essay structure and organization
- Understanding assignments
- Meeting professor expectations

In particular, students found the following methods helpful in addressing these needs:

- Using examples/models
- Finding errors
- Explaining the “how and why” of drafting and revising
- Encouraging students to ask “why” and receive clarification from professors
- Encouraging students to take ownership of their writing

These content and composing related areas were often combined with discussions of how tutors helped to alleviate writing and academic anxieties as well as personal doubts about their abilities. Students expressed that tutors encouraged them, gave them support and confidence, and were “patient,” “caring,” and “kind.” Students felt “connected” to tutors during sessions, and this connection was displayed through tutors’ willingness to listen, assuring students of their abilities, and suggesting additional resources to support students.

Those students who did respond to the final question focused almost exclusively on how the writing center helped to alleviate anxieties about writing, assignments, and academia in general. Written responses almost exclusively reflected two basic subject groups: first year students and returning students who had not been in school for a significant amount of time. Both of these subject groups expressed considerable concerns about their ability to

perform, succeed, and acclimate themselves into the academic community of SCCC. Both subject groups expressed gratitude to the writing center for encouraging them and giving them confidence to believe in themselves and their ability to succeed. Specifically, several participants of both groups remarked that the writing center made them feel “important,” took their work “seriously,” and helped to address “embarrassment” that hindered their experiences in and out of class at SCCC. Several participants in the returning student subject group remarked that had they known about the writing center sooner they would have not dropped out of SCCC or would have come back sooner.

Though the evaluation was geared towards specific areas of the composing process, student responses focused almost exclusively on how the writing center helped to alleviate anxieties about acclimation, adaptation, support, and placement in the college community and academia in general by offering them a “place”: somewhere that was “quiet,” “spacious,” “inviting,” and “open.” Several respondents mentioned the use of the writing center’s tables and chairs to study, to sit and read between classes or while waiting for a bus or their ride, and to just “spread out” their “stuff.” The material, technological resources were also cited in terms of the ability to plug in laptops and use the printer from their laptops.

Based on my own observations and experiences with students at SCCC, this need to claim or dwell in a space, a space that could also help them with academic and professional tasks, reflects the fragmented life that most of these students live. Many of the students who utilize the SCCC writing center are “students of difference ... included but not invited to invent a new university that might suit them” (Grimm 10). These students have many demands and obligations that pull them away from locating themselves in the college’s physical and institutional geographies, and yet the writing center acts like a literal “center” for their busy, fragmented lives.

Questioning the Evaluations

I was happy with the results of the evaluations, but I started to question whether we were doing more harm than good in terms of postmodern critical writing center literature. As evidenced by recent discussions of the role of writing centers in a multi-modal digital society (Balester, Grimm, Grutsch McKinney, Lee, Sheridan, Silver, [2012], and Boquet and Learner [2012]), the problematizing and contesting of dominant literary practices and mediums

in order to critique and resist the writing center’s institutional role of managing and containing difference has become an important part of the ethos of the postmodern writing center. Sue Mendelsohn’s dazzling “Visualizing Writing Consulting” video presentation suggests that new media and the ability to intervene in the complex relationships between reader, writer, and discourse have significantly altered how tutoring and writing centers can be conceived and experienced. As postmodern/human geographers such as Paul Knox and Sallie Marston might imply and writing center practitioners know, a writing center is not a neutral oasis removed from everyday life, but exists at the intersection of local, institutional, global, and discipline influences and conditions. A writing center has a unique perspective on institutional power relations and politics that influence the work done in college because of its “alongside” position. Therefore, writing centers can engage in institutional critique identifying and questioning the relationships and discourses that students and faculty carry with them and interact with on campus.

As James Porter, et. al. have noted, institutional hierarchy is directly related to geography—where one is placed on the campus map has significant connections to where one is placed in campus hierarchy—and so the physical location of a writing center (Centralized? On the margins of the campus? A part of a Skills Center? Its own entity? Old building? New building? Basement? Top floor?) can tell us much about how a writing center is perceived by the academic institution it is connected to. Many writing centers exist outside but alongside and can take advantage of tensions and gaps between institution, classroom, and everyday life

Because of our particular physical location and placement in institutional hierarchy, the SCCC Writing Center could analyze how institutional power relations and positioning influences student/faculty/staff subjectivities and our writerly selves. Many students who come to our writing center complain about their frustrations with the bureaucracy of SCCC (registrar, financial aid, campus policies) and struggle to connect their complex lives with the demands of their classes and professors. Though they are coming for help with specific projects and writing assignments, several of the tutors encourage students to write public documents, petitions, letters, and e-mails to administrators and professors addressing their dissatisfaction with how they are treated by and placed in the institutional hierarchy.

This notion of making institutional and disciplinary rhetoric personal and specific rather than disembodied and distant is an attempt to encourage

serious material, social, and discursive engagement with the complex dynamics of campus life at SCCC, a “third space” of the personal, public and institutional funneled through the writing center. The crucial awareness of how hierarchies and power are spatialized, mapped, and rhetoricized—silenced, marginalized, ignored, or privileged through space and discourse—has slowly been making its way into the SCCC writing center ethos of some, though certainly not all, of the tutors. As an in-between place, not quite classroom not quite student space (just as a suburb is not quite city and not quite country), a writing center can call attention to this positioning and location and offer students a place (materially and rhetorically) from which to identify and challenge that positioning and location.

And yet because writing centers are a part of an institution, dependent on the institution for budgets and funding and often need to justify themselves to the institution by proving their worth to the institution, is the writing center the place for true institutional change? Can a writing center resist the very positioning that sustains and nurtures it? Do all the tutors share an institutionally aware tutoring pedagogy? Outside of those students who do seek “justice” from the institution, do we have a duty to provide unconditional support and acclimation into the institution through facilitating writing as a college resource? What kind of “place” would best serve our student population and our tutors? A suburb (an “oasis” of rest and rejuvenation) or a contact zone (a site of conflict and self-awareness) or the borderlands (a space of ambiguity and transition)?

These questions suggest that evaluations can be instrumental in a form of mapping that goes beyond mere geographical positioning. Borrowing from the University of Rhode Island’s writing center, the concept and practice of Tutorial Interaction Maps, the visual and discursive diagramming of tutoring sessions, could aid in identifying and tracking the ways tutors, students, instructors, and administrators all are complicit in how a writing center is conceived, perceived, and lived through language, materiality, and social relationships and positioning. Noting how directive or facilitating a tutor is in a session and the reasons for the strategies utilized in the session can raise awareness of the tutor’s role in supporting or critiquing dominant discourses, locations, and identities in the institution. And yet, we also have to remember that the acts of mapping and spatial planning can be a way to control and colonize as well.

As we have continued to collect evaluations, I still question the consequences of constructing a writing center as an objective, secure, stable place: can being

too familiar with spaces, genres, and topics work to the detriment of critical and postmodern writing center pedagogies? What happens when students become too close to these experiences and take them to be “normal” and “natural,” overlooking, ignoring, or forgetting the constructed material, ideological, and discursive production of structures of feeling, academia, and the institution? Can consistent use, presence in, and travel through spaces and places actually help institutional and ideological hegemony become ordinary, common, and accepted? Our evaluations have revealed that familiarity hasn’t bred contempt but just the opposite: returning students feel more secure, empowered, and willing to take risks with their writing, positioning, and identities at the college. More and more students are seeking help with challenging institutional rules and regulations they feel are unfair or unjust through the composing of letters and petitions. Though the staff often agrees with these rules (such as the regulation that smokers must stand at least 50 feet away from the building), it is encouraging to see students actively using writing to question institutional policies, no matter how selfish the motive may be.

I have started in an informal way to ask my staff these questions in order to engage with what Julie Drew calls the “politics of place”: “ways in which place plays a role in producing texts and how such relationships affect the discursive work that writers attempt from within the university” (57), seeing SCCC as producing multiple, conflicting spaces reflecting power relationships that include or exclude depending on imposed, shifting, and negotiated material conditions, institutional statuses and identities, as well as accepted and permitted discourse conventions of the various academic and social environments of the campus. Could the writing center problematize familiarity, transform these spatial-social-discursive feelings and practices into strategies and tactics for critique, resistance, and contribution, and still help students construct a notion of academic spaces as secure places? A place to start may be in looking at the language and metaphors we use to define a writing center and what we do there. The work of Mandy Suhr-Systema and Shan-Estelle Brown have identified oppression and resistance as being embedded in the very words we use to describe and label ourselves, our constituents, and the work we do in a writing center. Bringing a more critical awareness to how language influences both theory and practice through evaluations and heuristics can show us the very tangible consequences of the words we choose to talk about writing and tutoring.

These issues of identity, place, and discourse were not critiqued by the staff as most of the tutors asked whether it was their place to do this. Many of the new students I talked to at the SCCC writing center spoke about their need to feel comfortable, welcomed, and connected to their academic places, that the transition from home spaces to college spaces was made easier for them by locating and grounding themselves unambiguously in the spatial-socio-rhetorical geographies of the college in ways that allowed them to quickly identify and internalize the practices, conventions, and expectations for being a “productive” member of the SCCC community. So was the rejection of ideology and institutional hierarchical positioning a necessary strategy for surviving and integrating into their first semester at SCCC?

For many of the incoming students, a heightened awareness of institutional power relations and mapping made them feel “wrong,” “confused,” “nervous,” and alienated. The vast majority of students I spoke with want stability, security, an unambiguous place of comfort and support for their writing but can a writing center ever give them that?

In addition to the help they receive with their writing, students conceive, perceive, and live the writing center as an environment that is not decentralized or fluid or multiple, but rather a constant, coherent, lucid place to find some clarity in their increasingly fragmented lives. The writing center is a reliable presence for these students who find themselves between communities, projects, discourses, and identities. Yet do writing center practitioners have an ethical responsibility to problematize and deconstruct notions of transparent, absolute space, identities, and discourses? This tension between student, tutor, and institutional desires can be either liberatory or paralyzing depending on the context (Ortoleva). Whose needs are to be honored and respected?

Conclusions

Part of a postmodern writing center’s mission should be to help students position themselves in the college geography and critique that positioning as well. The negotiation between being supportive and raising consciousness is a difficult line to walk when dealing with students’ lives and their investments in education. Tutor evaluations are a valuable way to aid in constructing a social, academic, and material guide to help those not favorably positioned in institutional hierarchies. Using the ongoing evaluation process and the conversations they have generated between myself,

the tutors, and students who use the writing center, I have been attempting to re-evaluate and reposition writing center “good intentions” as an inclusive environment that encompasses public and private, recreational and professional, and “real life” and the academic as interconnecting relationships, experiences, and practices that depend on each other to structure how writing center work is conceived, perceived, and lived by tutors and students.

In order to gauge and explore these environmental relationships, multiple levels of evaluation, feedback, and reflection must be integrated into training, practice, and policy.

The writing center is informed by multiple competing forces: disciplinary, institutional, pedagogical, material, and the needs of the students the center is serving. As the history of writing centers has shown us, finding a place in the discipline was not easy, nor has finding a place in the institutional and physical geographies in which writing centers are located. Postmodern theory has given writing centers more credibility and validity in English Studies, and yet writing center practitioners need to be aware of the distance between how we see ourselves as a discipline and how our writing centers actually function in everyday life. Writing centers need to be aware of their “good intentions,” be they material, discursive, or social, and not neglect the very students we are trying to help. Though we can’t restore the “glory” days of suburbia (nor should we be striving to do so), writing centers can help students to critique how material environment, discourses, and identities are all interconnected, and can be used to center or decenter their experiences and ours in a writing center. Evaluations give students a voice, a presence, and an identity in the philosophy and daily practices of a writing center.

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