# WHO ARE "WE"? EXAMINING IDENTITY USING THE MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY MODEL

Alanna Bitzel
The University of Texas at Austin
alanna.bitzel@athletics.utexas.edu

*"We begin from where we are, listening to, facing and questioning the legacies each of us brings to [our] work."*
– Anne Geller, et al. "Everyday Racism," 90

*"Both the internal conversations with self and the more public conversations in our communities of practice are what shape our identities, what begin to help us and our tutors actually see what before was invisible."*
– Anne Geller, et al. "The Everyday Writing Center and the Production of New Knowledge in Antiracist Theory and Practice."[1] 114

As a writing center administrator–I oversee the Writing Lab housed within The University of Texas at Austin's (UT) Football Academic Center (FAC)–I have been interested in exploring how identities affect writing sessions. In their study of student identities, researchers Susan Jones and Marylu McEwen developed the Multiple Dimensions of Identity model ("A Conceptual Model"), which describes "the dynamic construction of identity and the influence of changing contexts on the relative salience of multiple identity dimensions, such as race, sexual orientation, culture, and social class" (Abes, Jones, and McEwen 3).[2] Last year, I applied Multiple Dimensions of Identity to the writing center context, implementing a workshop employing the model with the Writing Lab tutors.

In this article, I share the Writing Lab's experience using Multiple Dimensions of Identity, demonstrating that the model presents an effective and replicable training method for making visible some identities in the writing center and discovering how identity-laden power and authority dynamics can complicate writing center work. To help frame the discussion on identities, I begin by briefly summarizing some relevant writing center literature on power and authority as it relates to student-tutor interactions. Next, I give an overview of student and tutor identities in the Writing Lab, contextualizing the identities within the larger UT setting. I introduce Multiple Dimensions of Identity theory and describe the workshop format. Finally, I offer ideas for redesigning the workshop to facilitate deeper conversation among tutors and reflect on how the Writing Lab can continue examining identities beyond the workshop.

## Power and Authority

Much writing center discourse situates the tutor as peer, but the peer concept is questionable.[3] Complicating peerness are tutor knowledge and expertise. As Isabelle Thompson summarizes in her study of scaffolding in writing center sessions: "current research suggests that rather than the peer collaboration advocated by writing center practitioners in the 1980s, the collaboration between students and tutors is asymmetrical … Unlike peers, tutors and students are not equals because tutors bring knowledge and skills that students often lack to conferences" (419).[4] Muriel Harris explains that writing centers cultivate this knowledge and skill imbalance, training tutors "to be better acquainted with the conventions of academic discourse than students in peer-response groups" (379). When tutors acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for becoming effective students, writers, and tutors in the traditional academic structure, they are imbued with what John Trimbur describes as "a certain institutional authority" associated with the "values and standards" of the academic institution (23). This authority skews the relative power dynamic in writing sessions.

While tutor expertise and authority separate tutors from the students with whom they work, they can also afford significant opportunities for writing center sessions. Developing expertise equips tutors with strategies for stimulating student learning. Thompson shows that when tutors employ scaffolding techniques, for example, "[t]he tutor and the student share knowledge and responsibility for completing the task successfully, and the less expert student begins to understand the task from the perspective of the more expert tutor" (421).

Moreover, tutors' expertise may help students wrestle with institutional authority. In her landmark essay, Marilyn Cooper argues that tutors, "by virtue of their constant contact with institutional constraints *and* with students' lived experiences, are best positioned" (103) to help students "learn how to challenge these

constraints productively in the service of their own goals and needs" (102). Carol Severino similarly describes how tutors can help students to "'grapple with' or negotiate between and among intersecting and clashing cultures, languages, literacies, discourses, and disciplines; to help them decide when to follow organizational and stylistic conventions . . . and when to take risks and violate them" (2). When tutors perform this work, writing centers can function as contact zones.[5] More recently, authors such as Nancy Grimm and Harry Denny have contended that tutors should use their expertise to assist students with obtaining tools to penetrate (Grimm 84)[6] academic conventions and determining how, whether, and to what extent to manipulate dominant discourses (Grimm 83, Denny 49).[7]

Knowledge of and familiarity with dominant discourses, various disciplines, and writing are not the only contributors to tutor authority. Tutors possess personal and social identities, which carry and compound privilege and power in different contexts. Peter Carino maintains that tutors should not shy away from "the inevitable presence of power and authority" in the writing center but to "confront and negotiate" it, taking "responsibility for what they know and do not know" (113). Seizing on this call to action, in Spring 2012, I strategized about how the Writing Lab can take responsibility for power and authority present in writing sessions. I started the process by reflecting on identity characteristics of the students and tutors at the FAC.

## Students and Tutors[8]

UT is a large institution. This semester, Spring 2013, the undergraduate student population totaled 37,759 (Fisher 1). In Spring 2012, the undergraduate student population totaled 36, 422 (Fisher 1). The previous semester, Fall 2011, approximately 93% of UT undergraduates were in the 18-24 years of age range, and approximately 49% of UT undergraduates were male (Office of Information Management and Analysis).[9] Additionally, in Spring 2012, 50.4% of undergraduates identified as "White only;" 19.9% as "Hispanic (any combination);" 18% as "Asian only;" 4.9% as "Black;"[10] and 6.8% with another racial/ethnic identity[11] (Fisher 3).

The FAC serves a minute and unique subset of the larger UT population–the members of UT's football team (117 members in the 2011 season) ("2011 Football Roster"), who have access to academic advising, mentoring, and tutoring support services, including the Writing Lab, at the FAC.

The students on the team are in their late teens to early twenties, all of the students are male, and approximately half of the team members in the 2011 season were Black. In contrast, the Writing Lab tutoring staff comprises primarily graduate students at UT, along with a few professional tutors. In Spring 2012, the Writing Lab had eight writing staffers, three female tutors and five male tutors, in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, six of whom were White. Unlike the students, only a few tutors were involved in competitive sports in college.

In addition to the above identity differences between the tutors and students, the tutors are more experienced with academic discourses than the students with whom they engage in writing sessions, especially the freshmen who are new to college-level work. Several of the graduate student tutors at the Writing Lab have even taught the writing-intensive classes required of UT undergraduates. Furthermore, the Writing Lab staffers engage in ongoing training and professional development in writing center pedagogy and practice. They are tutors, as Cooper describes, "who are in close contact with students and their everyday writing concerns, who reflect on their practices as tutors, and who study and critique theories of writing and language in light of their practice" (106). As graduate students, they are also entrenched in the academic hierarchy; they possess the institutional authority Trimbur discusses. These attributes indicate that the tutors and students at the Writing Lab are not peers.[12]
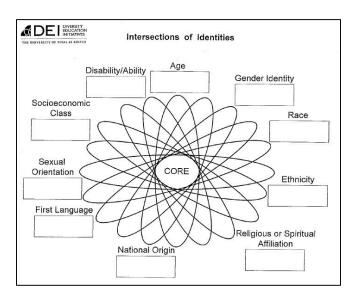
## Multiple Dimensions of Identity

Last spring, in considering what the above identity differences between students and tutors mean for the Writing Lab, I recalled a "Facilitating Meaningful Discussions on Diversity and Social Justice" ("Oct 17-21") workshop that representatives from UT's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE) ("Diversity Education") conducted in Fall 2011. The session incorporated Jones and McEwen's Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MDI), a model emerging out of the researchers' study of college students (405) in which they conceive of identity development as "a fluid and dynamic process" (411).

MDI builds on Kay Deaux's conception of personal and social identities that are "fundamentally interrelated" (5) and mutually informing. In Jones and McEwen's model, the personal/inside/internal identity, designated the "core sense of self" (408) is most deeply experienced by the individual and least visible to other people (409). Surrounding the core are social/outside/external identities, such as race and

gender, which are connected to the core and more visible to other people (408 – 409). In contrast to other developmental models and research on social identities that treat identity with a singular focus, MDI posits that identity dimensions "intersect with one another to demonstrate that no one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other dimensions" (409 – 410). Notably, in MDI, individuals can engage multiple dimensions at once (410), and their experiences with the dimensions undergo "ongoing construction" (408) such that dimensions will vary in importance and saliency across time depending on "a range of contextual influences" (411).

MDI seemed applicable to the Writing Lab because the tutors negotiate multiple identities–e.g., student, instructor, and researcher–and the Writing Lab serves college students who negotiate multiple identities–e.g., student, athlete, and teammate. The tutors have also found that students are interested in tutor identities. Tutors have shared experiences with me and other tutors of students asking about ages, races, ethnicities, religions, and marital statuses. I have also encountered students' interest in identities: a student once asked me, "What race are you?" which led to a conversation about what it means to me to identify as White and Hispanic; another time, I overheard a student say to a tutor, "It's nice to see another brother!" identifying a tutor's racial identity to be the same as his own.

Nevertheless, I was concerned about tutor willingness to respond actively to a workshop involving identities. Geller, et al. discuss the challenges of doing social justice work in writing centers, acknowledging that "when each of us has begun, taking even the most tentative steps toward . . . opening conversations with tutors and student writers, with colleagues, we may feel uneasy" ("Everyday Racism" 92). Still new as the Writing Lab administrator, a role I assumed in 2011, I sympathized with the unease they described. Moreover, having a small Writing Lab staff has the benefit of tutors getting to know each other well, but I wondered if their closeness would make them feel that they could not honestly share their thoughts with one another.[13]

I met and worked with DDCE representatives to design an MDI workshop for the Writing Lab staff for Spring 2012. The workshop lasted about an hour and a half, and the first half involved a DDCE worksheet (Taylor):



Tutors completed the worksheet, writing in responses of their choosing; leaving categories blank if, for instance, they disagreed with a category or felt it was not significant; or adding categories. The DDCE facilitator then invited tutors to share responses and reflect on the experience of filling in the worksheet–to indicate which categories were easy to fill in and which were more difficult, and why, and to identify which identities carry privilege, and when.

The second half of the workshop involved discussing Writing Lab-specific scenarios:

1. Working with a student on an assignment in which he must analyze a class text that contains "provocative"[14] language related to issues of race;
2. Overhearing "casual, though public" social conversations among students that involve derogatory or discriminatory language;
3. Respecting a student's unique personality in his writing while assisting him with an assignment in which he must adhere to "formal" academic writing standards; and
4. Responding to a student who feels he has received an unfair grade from an instructor who has a different racial identity than he does.

Tutors split into pairs or groups of three to talk about the scenarios before reconvening as a group. While tutors shared responses to all four scenarios, I focus here on scenario three, as it illustrates key issues surrounding power, authority, and identities in the Writing Lab.

## Scenario Discussion

Returning to my examination of power and authority and applying it to the Writing Lab, the perception that Writing Lab tutors are experts or have expertise may be positive: it may help get some students in the Writing Lab door, students who believe the tutors know more than they do about writing and can help them. But it may also negatively impact collaboration. Some students may want to relinquish a bit of their authority for writing decisions to tutors who "know better" than they do and have the ability to "fix" their writing.

For other students, believing the tutors are experts may discourage them from seeking writing support. Students who struggle academically or those who face stereotypes about their academic skills because of an identity they possess–such as athlete–may feel intimidated or fear judgment by those they deem more competent. The workshop emphasized that the language tutors use in writing sessions can inadvertently reinforce such feelings.

In particular, in response to scenario three, the staff talked about the use of "we," a phrase common in the language of writing center sessions. The DDCE facilitator pointed out that "we" is a powerful word, one that may have a different meaning to a student than it does to a tutor. If a writing tutor who is White and a graduate student says to an undergraduate student who is Black "we write this way in this discipline" in a good-intentioned effort to relate to the student when discussing "formal" writing, the tutor may intend "we" inclusively to mean "students," but the student may interpret "we" to be exclusionary, to mean "tutor/instructor" or "White people." This example demonstrates how the power and authority imbalance between the student and tutor, who has greater knowledge about disciplinary conventions, experience with the assignment at hand, and familiarity with the academic institution, is complicated further by another identity, race, that may become more salient in the moment.

The tutor's use of "we" in this case could be problematic. It could further distance tutor and student and prevent them from reaching the writing contact zone, a place where they can discuss how to negotiate dominant academic discourses and institutional hierarchies. It may distance students, especially the "newcomers to a discourse or culture" (77) Grimm describes, who perceive themselves as different–from a tutor, an instructor, an institution, or the writing they are asked to do–and prevent them from engaging with writing support services, writing, or academics more generally. Alienating students is particularly detrimental in writing centers that support students who are members of minority or marginalized communities on campus or centers that, like the Writing Lab, have small staffs and very small communities of students with whom they work regularly over the course of the year. Creating trust and rapport with the students who visit the Writing Lab is crucial.

## Workshop Redesign and Future Steps

The topic of identities is incredibly complex, and one short workshop can only be the beginning of an examination regarding identities, power, and authority in a writing center. However, thinking about the Writing Lab through the MDI lens called attention to and furthered conversation among tutors regarding some ways in which identities and identity differences between tutors and students may affect communication and student engagement in writing sessions. For instance, it highlighted the importance of how we, as writing center practitioners, position ourselves in relation to the students with whom we work and must rethink prevailing practices and be mindful of language choices, like "we," to promote productive moments of learning and understanding.

The workshop had several limitations. First, the DDCE worksheet, which frames identity dimensions in terms of pre-set categories, was potentially restrictive. However, tutors could add or change categories on the worksheet. And, despite its restrictions, filling in the worksheet allowed time for personal reflection on identities, and discussing the worksheet as a group fostered a greater collective awareness among the tutors of some identity intersections and differences. This first activity led fluidly into a discussion of the scenarios, and the small group setting provided everyone an opportunity to contribute. For writing centers wanting to implement a similar training, the conversation-based approach of the workshop seems particularly well-suited for smaller staffs. For a writing center with a larger staff, dividing the staff into smaller groups for the workshop may encourage greater conversation and help staff members discover new ways to relate to and learn from each other. I also recommend tailoring the scenarios to each writing center to make the workshop relevant to the everyday situations the tutors encounter.

Second, the initial workshop design was too ambitious. Each scenario involved issues that could have produced a rich discussion for which we did not have time. DDCE modified the workshop to reduce the number of scenarios when it conducted a second

workshop with the Writing Lab in Fall 2012. I asked DDCE to return that semester because the Writing Lab underwent a change. Of the seven writing tutors on staff in the fall,[15] five started working after Spring 2012, and I wanted them to experience the training as well. As in the spring workshop, the fall workshop started with tutors completing the worksheet. Next, rather than focusing on pre-determined scenarios, the facilitator invited tutors to describe situations that had come up for them, which reduced the pressure to talk about a set number of scenarios.

Ultimately, a workshop can only be successful in promoting discussion of identities to the extent that a writing center staff is willing to actively engage and contribute opinions. As writing center administrators, we can help create environments in which tutors are comfortable participating in social justice efforts by giving them practice doing so.[16] The Writing Lab staff, for example, has returned to the discussion on identities we started in the workshop in our weekly staff meetings, generating insights from writing center texts and our daily work with student athletes.

Moving forward, the Writing Lab staff needs to think more broadly about the Writing Lab as an entity, of our mission and values as a writing center that serves student athletes. We must continuously consider how the communities in which we work–the Writing Lab, the FAC, the Intercollegiate Athletics Department, and UT–influence identities. We must pay concerted attention to our practices and policies, examining the responsiveness of the tutoring staff to student needs and exploring the impact of identities on students' abilities to meaningfully engage and position themselves in the academic arena. We can do this by conducting research and program evaluations that incorporate student athletes' perspectives and feedback.

I take comfort in Geller, et al.'s reassurance that social justice "work can neither be done perfectly nor completely; it is an ongoing process" ("Everyday Racism" 87). This work begins with each of us. We, as individuals, must continue to expose ourselves to diverse populations and experiences, learning and understanding how our identities shape our work and us.

## Notes

1. For more on communities of practice, see Wenger "Communities of Practice" and Wenger, et al. *Cultivating Communities of Practice.*
2. Abes, et al. updated Jones's and McEwen's 2000 model to incorporate "meaning making."

3. See Weaver, especially 79 – 91, for her summarization of writing center literature that problematizes and questions "neutrality and 'peerness'" (84).
4. See Bruffee for the perspective of "peer collaboration advocated by writing center practitioners in the 1980s" (Thompson 419).
5. See Pratt for a discussion of the "contact zone."
6. Grimm argues, "dominant discourses will remain impenetrable to students who are true outsiders" if writing centers adhere to traditional mottos that students must "do all the work" (84).
7. See Denny, who discusses queering writing sessions and avoiding the teaching of "passing" in writing centers, whereby tutors "teach students to move toward and privilege the academic discourse community" (53). Denny argues that "writing mentors ought to help students bridge the multiple literacies to which they have access and those dominant forms they require for academic success" (49).
8. The description of students and tutors at the Writing Lab in this section includes only a few identities, those that are most visible and/or are most explicitly referenced in the scenario I describe later in the article.
9. The age range and gender category percentages are based on data from the fall semester of the 2011 – 2012 academic year. According to the Office of Information Management and Analysis website, the office "produces its Statistical Handbook annually based on data from the Fall semester."
10. The percentage for the "Black" race/ethnicity category actually reflects the "Black Total" race/ethnicity category, which includes "Black only" (4.6%) and "Black (2 or more, excl. Hisp.)" (0.4%). The data reflects that, as of fall 2010, individuals may "specify more than one race/ethnicity in identifying themselves" (Fisher 7).
11. The memo lists the additional race/ethnicity categories as: "American Indian only," "Hawaiian/Pac. Islander only," "2 or more (excl. Hisp./Black)," "Foreign," and "Unknown."
12. Unless we in writing centers adopt Gardner's "expansive" notion of peerness, of peers in the sense of "human beings."
13. Grimm (91) discusses how communities can be limiting, referencing Wenger, Etienne, et al.
14. The phrases in quotations in the scenario descriptions come from the prompts DDCE provided.
15. In Fall 2012, we had seven writing staffers, four female tutors and three male tutors, in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, six of whom were White. Our Writing Lab staff currently comprises these same seven writing tutors, as described in the "Students and Tutors" section.
16. On comprehensive tutor education programs, see Greenfield and Rowan.

## Works Cited

"2011 Football Roster." *Texas Sports*. UT Athletics, 2013. Web. 24 Feb. 2013.

Abes, Elisa S., Susan R. Jones, and Marylu K. McEwen. "Reconceptualizing the Model of Multiple Dimensions

of Identity; The Role of Meaning-Making Capacity in the Construction of Multiple Identities." *Journal of College Student Development* 48.1 (2007): 1 – 22. Print.

Bruffee, Kenneth. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary Olson. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1984. 87 – 98. Print.

Carino, Peter. "Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring." *The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship*. Eds. Michael Pemberton and Joyce Kinkead. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003. 96 – 113. Print.

Cooper, Marilyn. "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers." *Writing Center Journal* 14.2 (1994): 97 – 111. Print.

Deaux, Kay. "Reconstructing Social Identity." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 19.4 (1993): 4 – 12. Print.

Denny, Harry. "Queering the Writing Center." *The Writing Center Journal* 25.2 (2005): 39-62. Print.

"Diversity Education Initiatives." *Division of Diversity and Community Engagement*. The University of Texas at Austin, 13 Feb. 2012. Web. 13 Jun. 2012.

Fisher, Kristi. "FINAL Enrollment Analysis for Spring 2013." Memo to President William Powers, Jr., 29 Apr. 2013. Office of Information Management and Analysis. The University of Texas at Austin. Print.

Gardner, Clint. "Peer Tutoring: The Writing Center's Essential Contact Zone." South Central Writing Centers Association. Holiday Inn Marina, Corpus Christi, TX. 21 May 2013. Keynote Address

Geller, Anne, et al. "Everyday Racism: Anti-Racism Work and Writing Center Practice." *The Everyday Writing Center*. Eds. Anne Geller, et al. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2007: 87 – 109. Print.

Geller, Anne, et al. "The Everyday Writing Center and the Production of New Knowledge in Antiracist Theory and Practice." *Writing Centers and the New Racism*. Eds. Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011: 101 – 123. Print.

Greenfield, Laura and Karen Rowan. "Beyond the 'Week Twelve Approach:' Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Antiracist Tutor Education." *Writing Centers and the New Racism*. Eds. Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2011. 124 – 149. Print.

Greenfield, Laura, and Karen Rowan. "Beyond the 'Week Twelve Approach:' Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Antiracist Tutor Education." *Writing Centers and the New Racism*. Eds. Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011. 124 – 149. Print.

Grimm, Nancy. "Retheorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantage Based on Race." *Writing Centers and the New Racism*. Eds. Laura Greenfield and Karen Rowan. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011: 84 – 100. Print

Harris, Muriel. "Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups." *College Composition and Communication* 43.3 (1992): 369 – 383. Print.

Jones, Susan, and Marylu McEwen. "A Conceptual Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity." *Journal of College Student Development* 41.4 (2000): 405 – 414. Print.

"Oct. 17-21: Social Justice Week Planned for School of Social Work Community." School of Social Work: Educating for Change. The University of Texas at Austin, 2012. Web. 13 Jun. 2012.

Office of Information Management and Analysis. "Distribution of Students by Level and Age." *Statistical Handbook (In Progress)*. The University of Texas at Austin. Web. 24 Feb. 2013.

Office of Information Management and Analysis. "Enrollment by Classification and Gender." *Statistical Handbook (In Progress)*. The University of Texas at Austin. Web. 24 Feb. 2013.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* (1991): 33 – 40. Print.

Severino, Carol. "Writing Centers as Linguistic Contact Zones and Borderlands." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 19.4 (1994): 1 – 5. Print.

Taylor, Betty Jeanne. "Intersections of Identities." Austin, TX: Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin, 2011. Print.

Thompson, Isabelle. "Scaffolding in the Writing Center: A Microanalysis of an Experienced Tutor's Verbal and Nonverbal Tutoring Strategies." *Written Communication* 26.4 (2009): 417 – 453. Print.

Trimbur, John. "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" *The Writing Center Journal* 7.2 (1987): 21 – 28. Print.

Weaver, Margaret. "A Call for Racial Diversity in the Writing Center." *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*. Eds. Christina Murphy and Byron Stay. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2006. 79 – 91. Print.

Wenger, Etienne. "Communities of Practice. Learning as a Social System." *The Systems Thinker* (1998). Print.

Wenger, Etienne, et al. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2002. Print.