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Beyond the Tutorial: Collective Cultures and Shared Grief in the Writing Center

Fall 2007 / Focus

by **Emily Walker Heady**, Liberty University

Tragedy focuses attention on intercultural understanding and the connections still to be made



Emily Heady

Most writing center tutors who work on campuses with substantial numbers of ESL students know that the misunderstandings and confusions that occur in tutorials go well beyond language difficulties. While a Korean student might tend to put verbs at the end of the sentence or omit articles, she might also find herself struggling to speak in her own individual voice—something an American tutor is likely to encourage. Indeed, many problems faced every day in writing centers can be traced to conflicts that arise when the individualism associated with the ethics, ways of seeing the world, and pedagogical practices that characterize American universities come into conflict with the more communal epistemologies and practices that we often associate with Asian students. Although I do not want to rehearse the experiences of countless Asian students who struggle to make a transition from “we” to “I” (Staben and Nordhaus 73), I would like to suggest that a simple binary opposition between a Korean, Japanese, or Chinese “we” and an American “I” fails to account for the complex ways in which the writing center interrogates, manipulates, and reconfigures this binary. The very nature of a writing center tutorial puts pressure on the opposition of Asian collectivism to American individualism, for it asks students—perhaps contradictorily—to collaborate one-on-one. But if the structure of the tutorial often causes confusion, it also offers an opportunity to

reflect productively on the “we” and the “I,” especially when the tutorial is understood in the context of larger events such as the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007. This event in particular, which resonated quite differently for Korean and American students, offered a striking opportunity to explore the political tensions inherent in writing tutoring within a larger, real-life context. Recognizing the politics of the tutorial—the interested and opinionated way in which it approaches ideas such as “the individual” or “the collective”—allows for greater understanding and more effective communication between tutors and the students they seek to help.

In part, the confusions tutors at my school faced as they attempted to help Korean students deal with the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings, in which a troubled Korean-American student opened fire on a largely non-Asian group of faculty and students, can be traced to a general haziness about what “collaboration” means. As Lunsford and Ede argue throughout *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, collaboration is a contested concept within American academia. Even as the university ostensibly invites group-think and co-authorship, it also privileges the voice of the individual author (in the form of a monograph, an original point, or a thesis-driven argument) over the voice of the many or even of the few. This situation plays out dramatically on a day-to-day basis in writing centers, as tutors struggle to steer a middle course between sharing what they know about writing and seizing control of students’ drafts (Lunsford 47). Writing centers, then, are caught in a bind, doing collaborative work in an individualist culture.

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Writing centers serve as “contact zones”—“social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 35)—and as such, they place these questions about collaboration within a multi-national context. Even so, our tutors also learned that the ways in which the “contact zone” constructs relations between individualist and collective cultures shifts markedly when tutors begin to relate to Asian, and particularly South Korean, students outside the framework of the one-on-one tutorial. The **Graduate Writing Center at Liberty University**, a large and rapidly growing Christian school located in Lynchburg, Virginia, was set up with the school’s sizeable Korean population in mind. Of 650 international students, over 200 hail from South Korea, and the vast majority of these are in graduate school. In our first year of operation, approximately 75% of our encounters in the GWC were with these Korean students. We began to address the needs of the Korean students in the usual way—by training tutors to run effective tutorials. Tutors learned to explain the American university’s stance on plagiarism, to guide productive conversations about the difference between indirect and thesis-driven argumentation, and to seek out a balance between students’ own voices and the linguistic demands of their chosen fields of study. In other words, they learned (we thought) to help ESL students meet the expectations of their academic programs without appropriating or Americanizing their ideas, voices, and selves (Severino 53). More concretely, tutors learned that what Harris calls “the Asian preference for indirection” (199) translates into hidden or missing thesis statements and papers that seem to meander from sub-topic to sub-topic, rather than forcefully illuminating a single point; that the Asian tendency to value individual

experience less highly than do Americans often causes them to plagiarize (Harris 199); and that in Korea, as Sarah Graff notes, “students are graded highly by their teachers if they imitate classic writers” (qtd. in Stanley). Finally, tutors spent a good deal of time with some Korean professors at the school learning about how Korean words and sentences are constructed and how Koreans understand gender roles, age relations, manners, educational practices, hand-gestures, and so on.

What was less usual about our early days was our willingness to see the Korean students in situations other than one-on-one tutorials. Initially, we began offering reading groups and conversational English groups, and these shifted the understanding of American-Korean relationships that tutors had gleaned from one-on-one conferences: instead of watching a student from a collective culture struggling to personalize his thoughts, tutors instead saw groups of students constructing their individuality in relation to one another. Largely because of these groups, the relationships the Koreans and their tutors had already established in writing conferences flourished, and friendships were formed. Koreans and Americans were beginning to understand each other’s jokes, fried chicken and kimchi had been shared, and social events, including field trips to Jiffy Lube and Subway and a Korean Poetry Slam, were in the works. Under these conditions, our tutors began to theorize the relationship between American and Korean cultures in a much more sophisticated fashion than they had previously. In fact, one of the tutors remarked that she had been wrong initially about what collective culture meant. Whereas when she only saw Koreans in tutorials she had thought that they simply were not able to construct original thoughts with any confidence or skill, she later realized that they do so as frequently as their American counterparts: “They have trouble with a thesis, but it’s not that they can’t write one—it’s just that they want to bounce their ideas off everyone else first to see what matters to the group.” It was this legitimate cultural understanding and the friendships produced by the conversation and reading groups that opened up the opportunity for another sort of productive dialogue after the Virginia Tech shootings.

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In the days following Seung-Hui Cho’s actions at Virginia Tech, our Korean students felt the effects of his actions particularly strongly. At least fifteen Korean students came into the writing center to apologize personally for what Cho had done. One of our tutors, a Korean also named Cho, apologized to all of us and said the he felt particularly to blame because of their shared surname. Our other staff repeatedly informed the Korean students and our fellow GWC employee that we knew they were not responsible for the shootings—a move which came naturally enough to a roomful of Americans but which did little to help the Koreans feel better. More sophisticated rhetoric was no more effective. One tutor said that he hoped the Koreans would not blame him for everything that Caucasians did, but while the Koreans understood the analogy, they did not find it consoling. As one graduate student put it, “Americans are individualist. If one of them does something bad, that does not matter for the others. Koreans are so different.” At this point, we shifted tactics. A tutor who hails from Kenya stepped in, saying that she felt Cho’s crimes were stereotypically American: they seemed much more indebted to Rambo and video-game violence than to anything that could be traced to Korean culture, and the other employees—a

Lebanese and four Americans–agreed. This still did not help. A different Korean student said in response, “Yes, that is American movie crime. But he is Korean.”

The rhetoric we employed in the writing center after the events of April 16 suggested that our understanding of Korean-American relations had shifted radically from our early days, but it suggested as well that we had much to learn. If conversation groups had allowed us to appreciate Koreans as individuals, this revision caused us to downplay, perhaps too much, the claims that the Koreans’ collective culture exerted on them. In short, getting to know the Koreans as individuals was a temptation: it caused our tutors not to recognize some of the ways in which American and Korean culture really were different, and it stymied our tutors’ attempts to help the Koreans deal with their collective grief and sense of guilt following the Virginia Tech shootings. This radical reversal suggests that the cultural problem Americans and Asians face in writing centers is less that they occupy different positions within the individual/community binary, but rather that the various situations in which tutoring, conversations, or other forms of teaching occur tends to privilege either individuals or groups. It suggests, in short, that the tutorial is itself a culture of individualism, the reading group a culture of community, and so forth. It suggests, moreover, that writing center administrators would do well to build such self-reflective analysis into their pedagogies as they seek to train tutors about the rules of the “contact zone” in which they operate. Indeed, it was only when our tutors together entered into the Koreans’ collective grief and offered handshakes and prayers from “our people to yours” that the Koreans were able, finally, to say “thank you” and move on.

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