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Not Playing it Safe: Tutoring an Ethic of Diversity within a Non-Diverse Environment

Fall 2007 / Focus

by **Andrew Rihn**, Kent State University

Challenging privilege and confronting racism in the consultation



Andrew Rihn

For many, the word diversity has become synonymous with statistical representations of race, class, and gender. Although this element is a vital one, there is another, more interior, aspect that must be addressed. Diversity must also be a state of mind, an ethical code of inclusiveness. Such diversity has the potential to change much more than numbers; it can change the way tutors think and (re)act during tutorials. Statistical diversity often has a way of fostering a more diverse attitude, but how can we cultivate that state of mind in a non-diverse environment? My writing center is located on a regional campus of **Kent State University**, and our student body is overwhelmingly middle class and very much white. It is imperative that tutor training seeks to enable us to work with minority students, yet as a conscientious tutor I cannot ignore the fact that a large percentage of our students come from very privileged backgrounds. These students' experiences differ from the usual discussion of diversity, and this difference comes through in their writing. If our **writing center** wants to remain true to our principles of encouraging diversity, what role does the tutor have in either reinforcing or challenging these privileged students and their writing?

One central element of writing center work is our role as both a "contact zone" and a "safe house." Janice Wolff makes clear the need of the writing center to become "a safe house in the rather dangerous environs of the academic

institution, a social space where meaning can be made, where risk-free learning can take place" (45). For minority students and members of oppressed groups, it is important for writing centers to recognize this role and to create within themselves the ability to serve as an antidote to the often stifling and unfair requirements of the academic university.[1] In her book *Good Intentions*, writing center director Nancy Grimm explains that these requirements manifest themselves in "institutional habits, practices, assumptions, and perspectives" which either impose the dominant culture's view or marks minority students' experiences as "not normal" (104, 108). One of our roles in the writing center is to comfort the afflicted, but another is to afflict the comfortable. That is to say if we can create a more comfortable and empowering environment for anyone silenced or displaced by the university, then we can also question those comforts enjoyed by those whom the university privileges. Just as we can turn the writing center into a "safe house" for some, we can use it to create a "contact zone" for others.[2] Defined by Mary Louise Pratt, "contact zones" are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (607). For students who have always found the classroom to be their "safe house," a conscientious tutor can add the valuable element of risk into their learning.

Contact zones can be an asset in diversifying the otherwise privileged tutorial session.

This is a fine line to walk for tutors, as we already work in what Nancy Grimm calls the "awkward triangulation between student and teacher" ("Rearticulating" 530). Students must write for the rhetorical context of the teacher, with its assignments, due dates, and grades, while tutors are not expected "to change what students learn but to get students to conform to institutional expectations and values" (530). This expectation makes the writing center complicit in the oppression of minority students. Yet I see our ability to create and work within contact zones as a way to "change what students learn." Contact zones can be an asset in diversifying the otherwise privileged tutorial session. By creating an uncomfortable site that challenges the privileged student, we are agitating for change within that individual. This can happen even when the tutor also holds privileged positions, such as being a white male (like me). As Phyllis Lassner points out, the "multidimensional issues of difference are nowhere more apparent than in peer tutoring people who are more peer than different" (155).

This theoretical approach was brought to life for me one day when a white student came in to the writing center to ask a very basic question. Perhaps it had been about a citation, or maybe a minor grammatical question — it does not matter. What she was doing was feeling me out, testing the waters to see if I was receptive and friendly, a "safe house" for her to pose a much riskier and pressing question. After I answered her first question, she pulled out another paper, telling me that for the most part she felt it was fine, but asked if I might read it over and tell her if I thought the paper seemed racist. She explained that the paper was for her course Fundamentals of English Grammar, taught by a professor I knew for bringing diversity into otherwise non-diverse classrooms. [3] Her subject was Black English Vernacular (BEV) and she wanted to look at its structure to show that it was as logical and valid a system as any other system of English grammar.

That was where I stopped her. Before we went any further, I felt it necessary to make explicit my initial thoughts on the subject. I told her, without having read her paper, that yes there were probably some racist elements to it. I explained

that I regard the English language as having been constructed on institutionalized racism and that that makes speaking in an actively non-racist manner very difficult. Furthermore, as we were both white, and had been raised in a racist culture that gave us privileged and preferential treatment, our ability to speak without any intimation of racism was going to be a challenge. At this point I had made the session somewhat uncomfortable — I had turned it into a contact zone — but I felt it necessary to alter the “safe” progress of the tutorial and be as up front and honest as possible with the student. One danger of discussing racism and racial privilege is that many white people become defensive, a reaction which can shut down a tutorial. I made sure she understood that when we spoke about racism, we were talking about her language and socially learned patterns of thought; I was not judging her as an individual. Despite this assurance, we both knew what lay ahead was not going to be easy or fun.

It is, however, important to remember that we can, as tutors, challenge privilege and incorporate an ethic of diversity into every tutorial.

She agreed with, or at least appreciated, my thoughts on the subject and agreed to go on with the session. As she read her paper aloud, I listened closely to her word choices, to the assumptions behind her thesis, as well as all the usual things we listen for as writing tutors. Her thesis was well-thought out, clear and strong. She stayed on topic and did not wander into unrelated subjects. The paper was pretty good. However, as far as linguistic racism was concerned, there was a small problem in the introduction. As she read, I realized that a basic assumption of her introduction was that the reader had been raised with so-called “Standard English” and was thoroughly unaccustomed to BEV. Without stating as much, I asked her about the introduction. My questions dealt with the nature of her audience. Was she writing for a specific professor? If not, who was her imagined audience and what did they look like? As we discussed it, she realized the introduction’s underlying assumptions, and she began to see where she was being exclusive rather than inclusive. In her draft, she had normalized her experience of growing up white and middle-class and shifted that experience onto every potential reader. The conversation soon transitioned to ways to alleviate the paper’s problem. She began to see that there was little hope of salvaging her introduction, and resigned herself to writing a new one. However, rather than dreading the task of revision, she seemed eager for it and pleased that she had the power to wipe out racism, if only a very tiny bit. This revision was much more than addressing grammatical concerns or drafting a more fluid paper. For her, this revision became a moral imperative.

Looking back on the session, I was surprised by how such a seemingly easy and benign solution could be applied to such a difficult task. Subjects of difference, be they race, gender, sexual orientation, or anything else, are rarely going to be comfortable to discuss. In the writing center, there are numerous other pressures which make such situations even less comfortable, a major one being that the tutors (as well as the students) are often dealing with a complete stranger. The task for the tutor then becomes judging how (un)comfortable to make the session. Is it more beneficial for the student if we only bring up issues dealing with unclear thesis statements and cohesive conclusions, or is it more helpful to discuss racial politics and the possibly racist assumptions of a paper? Should the tutor play it safe or actually work to make the student less

comfortable — i.e., should the tutor provide a “safe house” or a “contact zone”?

Like most aspects of peer tutoring, there are no hard and fast rules for this element of our work. Every situation is different, just as every tutor and every student is unique. It is, however, important to remember that we can, as tutors, challenge privilege and incorporate an ethic of diversity into every tutorial. Often these goals can be achieved through what we might think of as traditional or “neutral” means, such as raising a discussion about audience, but this must be done conscientiously, with intention. As with any session, the most important ingredient is to first create a feeling of trust by being as open and honest with the student as possible, even if that means making some mistakes. That honesty, combined with the willingness to confront such uncomfortable subjects as racism, is what is needed to turn an otherwise “safe” session into a contact zone.

Notes

[1] For a more in-depth look at the unfairness of the academic system and its impact on writing center work, see Nancy Grimm’s book *Good Intentions*, specifically Ch. 5, “Toward a Fair Writing Center Practice.”

[2] For another look at ways in which my Writing Center has worked with contact zones, see Dr. Jay Sloan’s article in *Praxis*, “**Collaborating in the Contact Zone: A Writing Center Struggles with Multiculturalism.**”

[3] For a look at diversifying a mostly white classroom on my campus, see Dr. Keith Lloyd’s article

“**Teaching the Illusive White Student: Encouraging White Students to Think Multi-Culturally while Challenging the Myth of Whiteness.**”

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