The Communally Focused Writing Center

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Writing center work is hard work. The seemingly infinite number of writing center metaphors attest to this. Writing center workers are tutors, teachers, coaches, consultants, peers, mentors, counselors, and advocates. They are expected to provide feedback for *any* type of writing at *any* stage of the writing process, and they do so by using minimalist, generalist, specialist, directive, and non-directive methods, often within a single session. We tell tutors to produce better writers, but we also train them to be concerned with the text. We tell them to ask the writer what to work on, but at the same time, we want them to assess writing so they can "lead" the writer to the points that really need to be addressed. I am convinced that all of these issues relate to the location of our tutors—or maybe I should say the non-location. Ultimately, writing center work is hard because tutors occupy what John Trimbur calls an academic "no-man's land" in which they are neither peers nor tutors although that is what they are often called (23). We expect them to be experts in academic discourses while claiming their value lies in their "peerness." This paradox is not lost on them.

But they somehow manage to rise above all of this. To borrow from David Bartholomae, I am continually impressed by the patience and good will of our *tutors*. Every time they sit down with a student, they must negotiate their non-location, as well as the paradoxes, inconsistencies, and competing forces of academia. I am surprised more don't throw their hands up. But they don't. They listen. They advise. They console. They persevere. While I would like to think that they do so because of some theory I mentioned in training or a writing center article I had them read, many do so simply because they want to help other students do better in their classes. They do not care about methods or theory or professors or administrators.

Here's a story about helping. Last fall, Luc[21] came into my office dejected. Apparently, he was frustrated about two sociology courses he was taking with a particular professor. Unfortunately, I was not surprised by Luc's struggles—while Luc was both intelligent and hard-working, his upbringing did not afford meaningful opportunities to acquire what James Gee calls the dominant secondary discourses that are closely connected to school and other institutions of power (37). Indeed, before coming to Northwestern, Luc had very little access to these discourses. He was born and raised in Haiti until age 12, when his father's sudden, tragic murder forced him to move to Southern Florida to live with his mother and grandmother. Unfortunately, the education Luc received in the Miami public school system did not compensate for the poor education he received in Haiti. Complicating matters was his lack of exposure to English, particularly Standard English, at home. Gee states that children "from non-mainstream homes often do not get the opportunities to acquire dominant secondary discourses . . . due to their parent's lack of access to these discourses" (37). This was clearly the case for Luc.

Still, Luc overcame these disadvantages, graduated from high school, and attended community college before transferring to our small, private Midwestern college to pursue

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[21] All student names have been changed to protect their identities.

a bachelor's degree in sociology. Luc faced many challenges as a student here. While his interpersonal skills and easygoing demeanor helped him socially adjust to our small, rural (and mostly white) campus, he struggled to acclimate to the college's academic culture—particularly regarding language. Luc not only had a hard time communicating with professors, he also struggled to both understand and engage the readings and assignments for many of his classes.

So, when a dejected Luc appeared in my office that afternoon, I had an idea about what was wrong. Luc desperately wanted to graduate so he could return to Florida to support his family. And I wanted him to do so. But for this to happen, he would need to pass at least three classes with this particular professor. Faced with this challenge, I asked Sarah, a talented and committed tutor, to meet with Luc several times a week. My charge to Sarah was two-fold: 1) help Luc understand his professors and the texts he was reading, and 2) help Luc communicate his ideas in standard, academic prose. Ultimately, Sarah was to follow Bartholomae's call to define and identify academic discourse conventions so they can be "written out, 'demystified' and taught" (635). Over the course of the next year, she did exactly that—she helped Luc communicate in academic discourse so he could pass his classes.

I cannot overstate what Sarah did for Luc. Because of her persistence and patience, Luc not only passed the classes in which he struggled, he also graduated with a degree in sociology, returning to Florida to help his family and contribute to his local community. Indeed, Luc's graduation was a celebration for everyone who knew (and helped) him—tutors, faculty, staff, and most important, his family. As an administrator facing potential budget cuts, I was ecstatic about his success. Each year, I submit data that quantitatively justify our funding, but now I had a convincing story that demonstrated the value of our Writing Center. Not only did Luc's experience show how the Writing Center contributed to student retention, his status as a minority student also showed how we contributed to the college's diversity initiative.

But I never shared Luc's story with administration. The more I thought about it, the more uncomfortable I became. Yes, we helped Luc pass his classes and graduate, but in doing so, we also reinforced the system that had labeled Luc as problematic and lacking. Perhaps Luc's story would help me secure funding for our center, but presenting it as a success story felt disingenuous, even unfair. Furthermore, I couldn't ignore the fact that sharing Luc's story would contribute to what Nancy Grimm refers to as a reductive characterization of writing center work:

> Sometimes we unintentionally participate in that reduction when we use what Nancy Welch has called a 'Moses' story to illustrate the value of the writing center. In these stories, a writing center tutor 'leads his "somewhat lost tutees" into the promised land of discovery and understanding' (213). When we explain what writing centers offer by characterizing students as 'needing help,' we reinforce a restricted understanding of literacy that privileges a mainstream, standardized, monolingual norm and that overlooks the work interlocutors must do to construe context and negotiate meaning. (Grimm, "Writing Center Narratives" 7)

In the end, I was uncomfortable with telling a story in which a writing center tutor led a "lost tutee" into the promised land of discovery and understanding. I was uncomfortable

telling a story that presented Luc as a student who "needed helped." Ultimately, I don't know if Luc really understood that he was categorized and treated in this manner (if he did, his situation—and the lack of an influential advocate—clearly forced him to passively comply in the interest of graduating). But I do know that instead of challenging an academic culture that is not as meritocratic or fair as it claims to be, our center's actions merely reinforced existing practice.

So, no, I did not share Luc's story with administration, but I am sharing it now. I am not sharing it as a success story; I am sharing it because it complicates my understanding of writing center work. Grimm calls on us to use the stories that "keep us awake second-guessing our decisions" as conceptual change narratives that "offer richer accounts of literacy learning, particularly ones that put more emphasis on ways to mediate the structures that determine meaning and less emphasis on holding individuals accountable for figuring out the workings of literacy on their own" (Grimm, "Writing Center Narratives" 3-4). Luc's story has kept me awake second guessing my decisions. While I cannot change what happened—nor am I sure how much I would change if I could—I believe that his story can function as a conceptual change narrative that complicates writing center approaches to literacy learning. More specifically, I hope his story can help us move beyond individually focused writing centers and toward more communally focused ones. This article, then, seeks to articulate how moving beyond an individual focus and towards a more communal one will help writing centers benefit the communities they are a part of.

(The Problem With) Individually Focused Writing Centers

At this point, I want to make it clear that I do not believe that Luc was harmed by our writing center. Luc benefitted in many ways from working with Sarah—he became a stronger writer and communicator, which served him well in his courses and his hometown community in Florida. But at the same time, I also believe that our center missed an opportunity to challenge and inform an academic system that categorized him at best as underprepared, and at worst, intellectually-lacking or lazy. I am convinced this missed opportunity was the result of our focus on helping Luc. Simply stated, we were so concerned with helping Luc pass his classes that we lost sight of ways in which we could challenge an academy that privileged a mainstream, standardized, and monolingual norm. Our student-centeredness prevented us from seeing how our perception of Luc—as someone who needed help assimilating to the system—kept us from acting in ways that could benefit the entire campus community.

Still, our center's individual focus is consistent with writing center orthodoxy. As Grimm observes, "If writing centers across the country have any one theoretical underpinning in common, it is the emphasis on individualized instruction" (18). Indeed, the writing center community has consistently maintained that our value lies within our ability to provide individualized, one-to-one feedback that is not feasible in the classroom. Muriel Harris points out that in writing centers, "the uniqueness of each writer is acknowledged as well as the writer's individual needs and the benefits the writer can gain from personal attention" (para. 7). Thus, if the object in any writing center is to make sure that writers—and not necessarily the text—are changed by instruction, then "any plan of action the tutor follows is going to be student-centered in the strictest sense

of that term" (North 77). This mindset has resulted in the promotion of non-directive, minimalist tutoring strategies that strive "to make the student the primary agent in the writing center session" (Brooks 220). To ensure that the writer is the primary agent in the session, writing centers have developed codes of behavior for tutors: "A tutor is *not* supposed to tell a student what to do, a tutor is *not* supposed to hold the pen, a tutor is *not* supposed to undermine a teacher by giving conflicting advice, a tutor is *not* supposed to proofread for a student" (Grimm, *Good Intentions*, 18-19). Writing centers have also developed theory that supports their individualized focus. Perhaps no theorist has been embraced more by the writing center community than Kenneth Bruffee, whose "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" is repeatedly cited as validation of writing center practice. Bruffee claims that writing teachers and tutors should engage "students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible" (210). Because the traditional classroom is hierarchical and not collaborative in nature, Bruffee argues that peer tutoring is valuable "because it provides the kind of social context in which normal discourse occurs: a community of knowledgeable peers" (212). In other words, peer tutoring provides an effective context for individual students to practice—and thus become proficient in—academic discourse.

At first glance, this emphasis on the individual seems both reasonable and beneficial. After all, writing centers do provide opportunities for individual conversation and feedback that are not readily feasible in the classroom. Indeed, as someone who teaches writing, I appreciate the space that writing centers provide—I simply do not have enough time to conference with my students as much as I would like. Moreover, the student-centered mindset has resulted in theories and strategies that encourage students to be active participants in writing center sessions. As Marilyn Cooper, I endorse the "emphasis on tutor's responsiveness to students and on students as active writers" (98). But I am also beginning to realize that our focus on the individual can also be problematic. I say this because I believe it encourages us to do what we claim not do: focus on improving papers. For instance, as Cooper points out, while Brooks repeatedly asserts that tutors are not to focus on papers but instead on students and their writing, minimalist tutoring encourages tutees to focus on their papers, and thus "their individual papers remain the focus of writing center sessions" (99). Likewise, while Bruffee claims that peer tutoring fosters a collaborative learning environment, the focus still remains on helping individual students assimilate into the academy. Consequently, instead of the directive pedagogy used by many college professors, writing centers advocate a non-directive pedagogy to help students master and adhere to academic discourse conventions.

Unfortunately, this individual focus can impact tutors negatively. Yes, many tutors are initially attracted to the simplicity of a student-centered approach, but they quickly realize that problems arise when they rely upon a strategy (or a combination of strategies) that are designed to help individual writers. Anne DiPardo chronicles how Morgan, an African American tutor, becomes frustrated and discouraged when the collaborative strategies she learned in tutor training fail her in her semester-long interactions with Fannie, a Native American student. As Trimbur notes, many undergraduate tutors like Morgan initially have both hopes of helping students become better writers and doubts about their ability to do so. As such:

> When their hopes are not realized, when tutoring sessions don't go well or when tutees' grades don't go up, tutors may start to blame the students they work with. More often, the tutors blame themselves, and their feelings of inadequacy can turn into a debilitating sense of guilt about not getting the job done. (Trimbur 22)

By focusing on the individual, then, we risk setting our tutors up for frustration and disappointment.

But what is even more concerning is how individually focused writing centers fail "to acknowledge the challenges of communicating in unfamiliar cultural and linguistic contexts" (Grimm, "Writing Center Narratives" 6). Indeed, in her discussion of DiPardo's essay, Grimm claims that Morgan's faithful adherence to her tutor training causes her to miss out on the "many chances to learn about Fanny's out-of-school literacies, identities, and passions" (11). For Grimm, individually focused tutoring philosophies and strategies are problematic because they hold individuals responsible for meaning making and ignore competing discourses and shifting contexts. They suggest that "the primary problem of a tutorial is within an individual student when in fact the primary problem is moving between contexts where values and assumptions conflict yet operate tacitly, thus being unavailable for scrutiny" (11).

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Malea Powell has issues with an individually focused writing pedagogy because student writers are highly complex, socially positioned individuals, yet the "goal of writing instruction was still—is still—individual mastery, the measure of the teacher still determined by individual students who we have 'helped' achieve that mastery" (572). For Powell, a more attractive alternative is a communally focused pedagogy that theorizes "students in composition classrooms in the ways that my own scholarly work encourages members of the discipline to theorize themselves and their practices—as a collective of connected humans, a community allied for a common purpose" (572). Whereas an individually focused pedagogy is designed to benefit the institutions in which we work, a communally focused pedagogy is "arranged for the benefit of all who reside within whatever imagined community is operational within the particular collective space where the 'teaching' is being enacted" (573).

While Powell's discussion addresses the writing classroom, I believe her observations can benefit writing centers and the communities we serve. Writing center professionals also recognize the complex, social positions of the students that come through our doors, but most of what we do is still geared towards helping individual students master the language of the academy. Moreover, because our individually focused pedagogy is designed to benefit the institutions we are a part of, our work is often characterized in reductive ways, and we find ourselves continuously fighting our role as a service entity in the same way that composition courses struggle with their status as service courses. For us to move beyond the individual, then, I believe we must strive to realize a more communally focused *writing center*. Powell outlines three main distinctions between a communally and individually focused writing pedagogy. What follows is a discussion of those distinctions in a writing center context.

1. *A communally focused [writing center] sacrifices the needs of the individual for the needs of the whole, whereas an individually focused [writing center] attends to the needs of the individual at the expense of the whole (Powell 573).*

After sharing this statement with my staff, one of my tutors bluntly said, "So, what, we're just supposed to say to the writer, 'I'm sorry, but you're gonna have to sacrifice your grade for the benefit of the team.' I mean, what does this exactly mean for me when I tutor?" My tutors love to ask what "all of this" means for them when they tutor, but in this case, I could appreciate her frustration. After all, who are we, as tutors and directors, to determine what individual needs must be sacrificed for the greater good? Where do we begin? I must admit that as an educated white male who benefitted from a mainstream, middle-class upbringing, I would be very uncomfortable asking Luc to do something that would jeopardize his chances of graduating. What gives me the authority to make that judgment?

Michael Pemberton believes this dilemma is "at the heart of the ethics of what we do in writing centers" (261). In the end, as tutors or writing center directors, we must decide whether we should focus on supporting or critiquing the academic system. Pemberton states that even if we choose to navigate some middle course, making this decision requires us to "interrogate our personal politics, our theoretical beliefs, our systems of value, and our philosophies of teaching" (261). Ultimately, he writes, these issues are "deeply rooted in our sense of who we are and what we think teaching (and tutoring) is all about" (261). Pemberton's use of first person plural pronouns is telling, for a communally focused writing center cannot answer these questions individually. After all, determining *our* value systems and philosophies is a lot different than determining *my* value systems and teaching philosophies.

As I read Pemberton's words, I can't stop thinking of something I wrote several years ago: "If writing centers want to be truly oppositional to the academy, they must encourage transgression by promoting abnormal discourse. However, if writing centers continue to encourage conformity to normal discourse—regardless of the method—they risk stifling many marginalized, oppositional voices" (Truesdell). Sounds good, but then I follow with this: "Granted, after much consideration and debate . . . the writing center community as a whole may decide not to support such dissent or resistance, which is fine—like other discourse communities, the academy must adhere to some standards and thus inherently practice some degree of exclusion" (Truesdell). At the time, I was uncomfortable adding the second passage, but I did so because I wanted to give myself an out. Why did I need an out? Well, to be honest, because I needed a job, and I did not want to publish something that would cause potential employers to hesitate from hiring me. I was clearly individually focused, putting my employment needs before the needs of the whole. Likewise, I was giving writing centers who wished not to dissent or resist a reason to continue doing so instead of considering their responsibility to the entire writing center community and the students we serve.

Of course, writing an article is different from actually working with a student in the writing center. What would a communally focused writing center look like in this context? Well, what if we, for instance, actually *encouraged* tutors and students to critique writing assignments? Clear contradictions to current writing center orthodoxy arise—common

practice advises tutors not to "criticize or in any way try to subvert teachers' assignments" (Cooper 102). In fact, our center's tutor handbook states that tutors should "never make a negative remark about an instructor." If a student complains about an assignment or professor, we tell tutors to be diplomatic and never take sides. Why do we do this? I believe it is because we are individually focused. After all, discouraging criticism attends to the individual needs of the professor *and* writing center—we support the professors, and they, in turn, support us. A communally focused writing center, however, would benefit everyone by encouraging critical readings that help identify why "teachers' ideas of what [students] need to learn sometimes conflict with what [students] think they need to learn and how recognizing these conflicts can lead to change as well as to accommodation" (Cooper 109). In other words—and this point is essential—the critiques would not be baseless complaining; instead, students and tutors would work together to identify why a particular assignment may be problematic. And then, just as important, they would have conversations with faculty about how the assignment could improve.

An excellent example of how critical readings could benefit the community concerns academic discursive practices. As Patricia Bizzell notes, new, alternative discourses are gaining acceptance in the academy because they "allow their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse . . . These new discourses enable scholarship to take account of new variables, to explore new methods, and to communicate findings in new venues" (74). Unfortunately, many professors still insist that their students adhere to traditional academic conventions and write in an assertive, impersonal, and supposedly objective voice. In a communal writing center, however, both student and tutor would work together to identify what happens when a professor requires students to write in this way. They could identify what is being assimilated or lost; they could also identify what would be gained by using other discursive resources. Then, after having this discussion, both the student and tutor could meet with the professor and dialogue about discourse expectations. Regardless of the outcome of this conversation, the entire academic community would benefit from these discussions. Bizzell notes that "we should be welcoming, not resisting, the advent of diverse forms of academic discourse, and encouraging our students to bring all their discursive resources to bear on the intellectual challenges of the academic discipline" (83). Discussions of academic discourse would benefit the entire academy by promoting a more inclusive academic discourse, and it would benefit writing centers by helping us move beyond individually focused service roles.

So how would this hypothetically play out in Luc's situation? Here's an example: Luc wanted to write about his personal experiences as a Haitian immigrant for several assignments, but he thought he could not do so because the research paper genre prohibited "personal" writing. More specifically, Luc believed that he was supposed to write research papers about topics that were meaningful to the professor, but not necessarily to him as a student. Luc did not believe he could write in first person either, or include testimonies of family members. Ultimately, for Luc, writing for college meant removing himself from the topic as much as possible and only including research that could be found through ERIC, Academic Search Premier, or any other library database. Sarah apparently operated under the same assumptions.

But what if this was not the case? What if Luc's sociology professor, for instance,

had never considered that Luc might want to write about his experiences and include testimony from his relatives and friends? What if Sarah, in looking for ways to make writing a more meaningful experience for Luc, decided to ask the professor if this was possible, or accompanied Luc to a meeting with the professor to ask if it was possible? In a communally focused writing center, Sarah would have felt empowered to suggest that she, Luc, and the professor discuss and negotiate the conventions of the assignment in a way in which all would benefit from learning Luc's perspective, thus enabling important personal experiences to be shared and considered.

2. *A communally focused [writing center] requires that [tutors] act as guides and elders, subsuming their own needs for the needs of the whole; an individually focused [writing center] pretends to community by claiming that the [tutor] has "given up" his or her authority in the [session] but, in making that claim, instantiates his or her authority even more firmly, operating within the same tired definition of power relations that race politics in the United States have relied on for decades—the belief that it is possible for folks in power to simply relinquish that power through the expression of individual will (Powell 573).*

A communally focused writing center is transparent. There are no hidden agendas. There is no posing or posturing. In a communally focused writing center, tutors acknowledge the experiences and insights they have, and they share those experiences and insights with students. Conversely, they are also transparent about what they do not know, and they listen to the experiences and insights of the students. Powell writes that teaching is a "responsibility, not an opportunity for me to show you how cool I am by pretending to waive the authority that the institution grants me . . . not an opportunity for me to pretend not to have the experiences that led the editors of this volume to ask me to compose this piece . . . and not an opportunity for me to pretend to a wisdom that I don't believe that I have" (578). Tutoring is also a responsibility, not an opportunity for tutors to withhold important information for students in the name of making better writers and not necessarily better papers. It is also not an opportunity for tutors to pretend that they necessarily know what is wrong with a paper or a student's writing style. Instead, communal writing centers are places of transparency where everyone shares what they do and do not know. They are places of convergence where power and authority—between tutor and student, student and professor, and tutor and professor—are acknowledged and ultimately negotiated. For instance, although they know that institutions coerce them in writing classes, both students and tutors in an individually focused writing center will "respond—quite rationally—by trying to make the papers match as perfectly as possible the specifications of assignments while at the same time—quite irrationally—trying to believe that in doing this students are asserting ownership over their texts and learning to write" (Cooper 102). A communally based writing center, however, would recognize this coercion and explore what could be done about it.

Perhaps this distinction can be better understood in terms of agency. I spend a lot of time talking with students and tutors about agency: what it is, exactly, and how it can be realized. For the most part, I am told that a prerequisite to agency is an understanding of how the system works. Once you have an understanding, students say, you can begin to

challenge, and hopefully influence, the system. Many students compare it to a game—once they know the rules, they can bend or break the rules in ways they see fit. And in many ways, this analogy makes sense. As Victor Villanueva asks, if learning Standard English was the key to parity, why does parity continue to elude so many? (115). Clearly, more needs to be done to help students challenge the system. But these challenges will not happen unless the system, rules, and power distribution are acknowledged and made transparent to everyone. As Gerald Graff writes, demystifying the academy means "changing the club itself as much as it means changing students" (25). Whereas an individually focused writing center ignores issues of power and authority to help a student become a better writer, a communally focused writing center will acknowledge and address power structures that influence and inhibit both students and texts.

One immediate way to do this is by allowing for more directive methodologies in writing center work. In the beginning of this essay, I discussed how writing center orthodoxy encourages tutors to have positive, confidence-building, collaborative exchanges with writers. In other words, a tutor is not supposed to be an editor who simply tells the writer what is wrong with a paper and how to fix it; instead, the tutor should seek to foster a collaborative learning experience in which both parties equally contribute to what Kenneth Bruffee terms the "conversation of mankind." Citing Michael Oakeshott and Lev Vygotsky's claims that thought is actually internalized conversation, Bruffee argues that people learn to think by learning to talk. Therefore, improved conversation is imperative to improved thought (209). For Bruffee, writing is a displaced form of conversation—thought is internalized conversation, while writing is thought re-externalized. Because of this, writers should engage in conversation as much as possible. If they are involved in conversation, Bruffee argues that writers will be able to become masters of normal discourse, and thus participate—understand and be understood—in the conversation of particular knowledge communities in both the academic and professional world.

Still, Bruffee does not believe the traditional classroom effectively helps students become members of knowledge communities because it is hierarchical, and not collaborative, in nature. Knowledge is not created by a community of peers in the classroom, but it is instead handed down to students from the teacher. Bruffee states that the main reason for this hierarchical framework is teacher distrust of class discussion—he claims that teachers do not create an environment where knowledge is created through peer conversation: "What we call discussion is more often than not an adversarial activity pitting individual against individual in an effort to assert what one literary critic has called 'will to power over the text,' if not over each other" (213). This is why Bruffee is such a strong proponent of peer tutoring. Ideally, peer tutoring models the conversation of knowledge communities by providing a place where all members participate and contribute equally.

Many writing center theorists have embraced Bruffee's argument and claimed that a minimalist tutoring approach is the best way to create this peer conversation. In minimalist tutoring, tutors are not teachers who simply pass down information by telling writers how to fix their papers; they instead are equals who make the writer do as much of the thinking and work as possible. Jeff Brooks states that a writer who passively receives knowledge from a tutor "may leave with an improved paper, but he will not have learned much" (220). Similarly, Evelyn Ashton-Jones claims that the best way for tutors to encourage conversation is to "talk in open-ended, exploratory ways and not

in directive, imperative, restrictive modes" (32). For proponents of minimalist tutoring, open-ended, non-directive questions result in a conversational session that helps writers become masters of normal discourse.

While current writing center orthodoxy tends to favor a minimalist approach, some theorists do express reservations with this methodology. Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns, for example, believe that a directive approach can be just as effective, if not more so, than a non-directive approach because it shows or models the normal discourse for the writer. In other words, once writers are shown how to do something, they will be able to express themselves more effectively because they better understand the discourse expectations of a knowledge community:

> Directive tutoring displays rhetorical processes in action. When a tutor redrafts problematic portions of a text for a student, the changes usually strengthen the disciplinary argument and improve the connection to current conversation in the discipline . . . . Thus, directive tutoring provides interpretive options for students when none seem available, and it unmasks the system of argumentation at work within a discipline. (237)

Indeed, other writing center theorists have argued for a more inclusive methodology that moves beyond the directive/non-directive dichotomy. Building on Cooper's claims that non-directive tutoring results in skills-focused, text-based sessions, several writing center scholars have argued that adherence to non-directive methodologies" can be interpreted to sanction withholding necessary cultural and linguistic information from students whose experiences and background do not match the assumptions teachers make about students" (Grimm, "Attending" 10). As Pemberton points out, "all writing tasks operate under constraints, and the best tutors will help students to understand what those constraints are and how they can be bent and molded" (268). A communally focused writing center, then, will use both directive and non-directive methods to help writers understand those constraints and, just as important, identify ways in which they can be bent and molded.

3. *A communally focused [writing center] is rooted in place in such a way that discussions of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, orientations, ableness [sic], etc. will always already be part of the community's understandings of itself and of what it means to attend to the good of the whole; an individually focused [writing center] denies place by positioning difference as its own special category of need—forcing us into a fragmented and tokenized understanding of difference which pits "us" against "them" and defines "the good of the whole" as "to the advantages of the majority" (Powell 573-574).*

I believe tutor training is one of the most difficult tasks writing center administrators are expected to perform. But not for reasons most people assume. Yes, it is difficult to find a time where every tutor is able to meet. And yes it is often difficult to address "everything" in one or two training sessions. In fact, after being hired as a director, I proposed offering a for-credit tutor training course for these very reasons. Part of my rationale was that such a course would result in a more effective tutoring staff that was better capable of helping

the myriad of students that come to the writing center, particularly those with their own "special category of need." Fittingly, the initial course syllabus was structured according to distinct categories: minimalist tutoring, directive tutoring, higher order concerns, lower order concerns, students with disabilities, ESL students, strong writers, poor writers, technology, etc.

A communally focused writing center, however, would not view tutor training as a means to promote specific tutoring strategies or to show tutors how to be more effective in dealing with students or issues that belong to a predetermined category. Instead, a communally focused writing center would resist categorization and use training to encourage students to consider contexts. For instance, instead of learning about how to help non-native English speakers, tutors would be encouraged to "think about why they come and what qualifies us to work with them" (Grimm, *Good Intentions* p. xii). Grimm points out that more than any specific strategy, tutors need to learn how to identify moments where ideologies collide: "They need to learn how to slow down and consider the stakeholders. What is the context? What's going on in this context? Whose is to gain, and who is to lose in this situation? And they need to recognize when someone is being forced to compromise" (Telephone Interview).

Of course, it is difficult to consider contexts and stakeholders in a homogenous writing center. A communally focused writing center, then, would consist of individuals whose experiences and perspectives help ensure that issues of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, orientations, and ability indeed become part of the community's understanding of itself. Indeed, staff diversity has been a key focus of the recent Anti-Racist movement in the writing center community. Frankie Condon, for instance, challenges writing center administrators "to insure that the diversity of our staff is, at a minimum, proportionately representative of the diversity of our campuses" (27). She also challenges administrators to restructure their training and curriculum to include "writing center scholarship that addresses race and racism, as well as other forms of oppression that intersect and often overlap with racism" (27). Condon specifically recommends that tutors be familiar with the multicultural work of individuals such as Grimm, Nancy Barron, Anis Bawarshi, Stephanie Peklowski, Harry Denny, Beth Godbee, and Moira Ozias. Condon furthers this argument in when she joins Anne Geller, Michele Eodice, Meg Carroll, and Elizabeth Boquet in speculating about "what new directions a discussion of literacy might take in your staff education course when you have tutors who speak Spanish at home, or when one of your tutors reveals his anger when his two home languages—Creole and Black English—are obliterated by 'standard' English" (54). For Condon and the other authors, a diverse writing center staff contributes to anti-racist work by offering the opportunity to complicate assumptions of literacy and language in the academy. Indeed, as helpful as Sarah was, I wonder how her sessions of Luc would have differed if she had not been a white, middle-class student. Would a tutor from an underrepresented population have been more likely to identify with Luc's frustrations? Would Luc have been more likely to communicate his frustrations with such a tutor? Would the professor have been more likely to negotiate assignments if such a tutor and Luc had chosen to talk with him?

I cannot answer these questions with any certainty because most of the tutors in our center are like Sarah; that is, they are well-intentioned, white, and middle-class—as in most of the centers where I have worked. For a variety of reasons, achieving staff diversity

is not an easy task. Not only are many institutions predominately white, potential tutors from underrepresented populations at times resist recruitment efforts because they do not want to be diversity tokens. As Grimm notes, "Undergraduates today are less cynical and more willing to consider other alternatives, but you have to convince them that they are not tokens. You have to convince them that you really want to transform or change" (Telephone Interview). As such, a communally focused writing center would work to ensure that tutors from underrepresented populations are not tokens. These centers examine what increased staff diversity means for the writing center, and even more importantly, the tutors that work in them.

Take, for instance, the case of writing tutors who are who are non-native English speakers (NNES). Unfortunately, faculty and students at times resist working with NNES writing tutors because of ill-informed stereotypes. A communally focused writing center would respond to this resistance by pointing out that there are approximately three times as many NNES (1 billion) as there are native English speakers (350 million) worldwide (Jenkins, "Exploring Attitudes," 15-16). These centers would also reference "global-Englishes" scholarship that suggests as the numbers of NNES continue to grow, NNES will have an advantage over NES because they are more flexible and resourceful in their English speaking abilities (see Jenkins, *World Englishes*; Kachru and Nelson). Still, a dearth of research hampers us from knowing the experiences of NNES writing tutors. Most research that does exist consists of first-person, self-reflective articles written by NNES tutors. For instance, in a column written for the *NNEST Newsletter*, Pisarn Chamcharatsri discusses how an ESL writer's assumption that he was an "American-Born Chinese" (ABC) made him question whether or not he should be proud of being misperceived as a NES. He also wonders:

> . . . how different it might have been if that international student had known prior to the consultation that I was a nonnative English speaker. How would the tutoring session have gone differently? What made the student believe that I could be an ABC? Was it my "accent"? Was it my role as a writing tutor? Was it the way I responded to his writing? I am still left with lingering confusions and questions, which, I now realize, have not been answered after all this time.

Questions like the ones Chamcharatsri asks are important for both NNES writing tutors and the writing community, and therefore, they need to be explored further. Potential for research also extends beyond the perspectives of NNES writing tutors. For instance, research could examine what actually happens in sessions where a NNES tutors work with ESL and non-ESL writers, or how the presence of NNES tutors affects staff dynamics. Research could explore the administrative implications of a more linguistically diverse staff, whether that includes training or relationships with other institutional constituencies. Potential research questions might include:

- Does the language status of the tutor and/or student affect what occurs in a session?
- How does tutoring affect NNES tutors' self-perception regarding their own linguistic abilities and/or identity?
- Does working with a NNES tutor change the language attitudes of NES students?
- How does the employment of NNES writing tutors affect staff dynamics? How do

NNES and NES writing tutors interact?
- Does the presence of NNES writing tutors affect the language attitudes of other NES tutors?
- How does the employment of NNES writing tutors affect the way the writing center is perceived on campus?
- Are students less or more likely to come to a center that employs NNES tutors?
- Do directors need to train and support NNES tutors differently from NES tutors?

In the end, I believe that Grimm's call for writing centers to seek more linguistically diverse staffs is commendable. But even if writing centers do not actively recruit NNES tutors, data suggests that they will continue to join center staffs in increasing numbers. As such, the writing center community has a responsibility to begin examining what this demographic shift will mean for our staffs, the students who visit our centers, the institutions that support us, and most importantly, the NNES tutors themselves. Such research may be difficult and may lead to difficult findings, but doing so would be a priority for a communally focused writing center because doing so would further the good of *all* its constituents.

Moving Beyond the Individual

Although she did not use a specific label, Nancy Grimm's keynote address of the joint 2008 conference of the International Writing Centers Association and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing included a description of a communally focused writing center:

> The work of this center is visible to all who pass through the hallways . . . The staff is large and diverse, a mix of many different disciplines and racial and cultural identities. Distinctions between higher and lower order concerns are not an issue in this writing center; writing coaches respond to queries that students bring, and these queries are as likely to focus on context, on multimodal texts, on oral presentations, or on knowledge-management challenges in a lecture-based course as they are to focus on a draft being revised for an English class. The students who work in the writing center are often students who used the writing center, particularly during their first two years in college when they were negotiating transitions between home literacies and academic literacies and coming to understand the power relations of the university. In this writing center, communication problems are understood as emerging from competing contexts with implicit expectations about appropriate genres, styles, and discourses rather than from a lack within students or from a failure of their previous schooling. Students are understood as shuttling back and forth between contexts and developing the competencies to engage productively in the power relations of these contexts. Writing coaches are the experienced travelers who can make explicit the often unspoken conventions, values, styles, and assumptions of competing discourses. ("Conceptual Frameworks" 13-14)

As I consider this description, I can't help but wonder if Luc would have been better served if he had visited this type of center. Or perhaps I should instead wonder if we all would have been better served if Luc had visited this type of center. My inclination is to say yes. I can't stop thinking about what may have happened—or what changes may have

occurred—if he had had the opportunity to do so.

I began this essay by stating that writing center work is hard work. It is. And it will likely be even harder work if we pursue a communally focused writing center. After all, doing so requires us to *continually* examine what we do and *continually* ask ourselves if our actions benefit the institutions in which we work. Are we attending to the needs of individuals at the expense of the whole, or are we sacrificing the needs of the individual for the needs of the whole? These are difficult, complex questions. And to start answering them, we need to pay attention to more stories like Luc's. I echo Grimm's claim that the entire writing center community will benefit from such stories that complicate and make us uncomfortable.

This essay, then, is not a call for an easier approach to writing center work. It is also not an endorsement of a particular method, strategy, or policy, or theory. It is, however, a call for us to do more than help the person next to us. We need to start thinking about the stakeholders in our communities and recognize our responsibility to move beyond the individual.

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