

# THE MINDFUL TUTOR: RHETORICAL LISTENING IN WRITING CENTER WORK

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## ABSTRACT

### THE MINDFUL TUTOR: RHETORICAL LISTENING IN WRITING CENTER WORK

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This work explores the role rhetorical listening plays in writing center praxis. Current scholarship on listening in writing center pedagogy has yet to examine this essential tutoring practice. The author argues that Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening offers the theoretical framework that will allow writing centers to fulfill their pedagogical goal of empowering students. Exploring examples from his own tutoring experiences and published tutoring narratives, the author shows how Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening expands tutoring praxis to better meet the needs of tutees. Rhetorical listening moves tutors into a sense of awareness concerning the complex experiences each tutee brings into a session. Recognizing this complexity, tutors work from a perspective that focuses on student need rather than institutional concern.

## INTRODUCTION

I began working in the Western Carolina University Writing and Learning Commons (WaLC) in Cullowhee, North Carolina, during the fall semester of 2014. I didn't have a choice; if I wanted the graduate assistantship and stipend, I would report for duty as I was told. And since I desperately needed the money, I gladly signed my name to work weekly in the WaLC, performing tasks I could do little but make assumptions about. At the time, I knew very little about tutoring and much less about the truly personal experience working in intimate, one-to-one tutoring scenarios provides to the tutor and tutee. Tutoring is a personal journey. The moment a tutor sits down with a fellow student, when that student faces the quickly approaching deadline of a History essay and stress has moved her into a different way of acting, the tutor gets to see how tutoring truly helps students overcome anxiety. The thirty minutes spent letting that student express her concerns might be the tutoring session she needs. In the same way, when that student comes back to the writing center after a couple of weeks to discuss another assignment and how her History essay turned out okay, I, as a tutor, get to share in the joy. And even though it is more than likely unwarranted, I take pleasure in knowing I might have helped that student in a useful way. But moments like this were not my expectation as I began tutoring.

In the beginning I was not thrilled about tutoring. I was afraid I would let my fellow students down as I engaged with them along their journey. After all, I had never *taught* anyone. The WaLC at Western Carolina University (Western) seemed like a place where I would have to *teach* writing, a subject with which I often find myself struggling.

And even more unnerving was the idea that students relied on me to help them succeed. At the time, I knew nothing of minimalist tutoring, the idea of letting the student lead the session as the tutor fades into the background. I knew very little of the historical context from which writing center work developed. I had yet to learn of the idea that students should be free to develop ideas independently from the tutor in tutoring session. My own personal ideas about writing centers were skewed by my limited experience with tutoring services from my undergraduate days at Dalton State College in Dalton, Georgia.

My time as a student at Dalton State College (Dalton State) included very few visits to the Writing Lab, a name indicative of the space's desolate persona. It was a room on the highest floor of the tallest building on campus, seemingly removed from the campus's daily life. The lab, filled with only a few tables and walls lined with dust-covered Dell desktops, resembled a 2003 middle school computer lab. I, like a few of my English classmates, used the lab to finish essays on the too long to start up computers right before the deadline. From one perspective, I viewed writing center help beneath me. I was an English major after all; why would I need help? The truer answer, however, is I found myself uncomfortable asking for help.

While my perception of the lab seemed common among my fellow students, the college itself did a poor job providing tutoring services and advertising the lab. Visits were limited to asking specific questions about specific moments in essays. If I visited for help, I was only allowed to ask about the correctness of specific commas or other very specific questions. Feedback on general essay concerns was not offered. At least that's how the English faculty who worked there explained the lab—peer tutors were not

around. At one point, I had a professor in an upper-level English course send my classmates and me to the Writing Lab one day when she was absent, so that we could use the computers to read an article she provided and answer questions concerning the reading. This past experience and the lab's perceived uselessness shaped part of my anxiety concerning working as a tutor. I developed my own understanding of writing center praxis through a subpar, academically harmful, experience.

Dalton State followed a grading policy for English courses that penalized a student a full letter grade when they had one comma splice, sentence fragment, run-on sentence, or subject-verb disagreement. This grading policy, as I understand it, developed out of a state writing exam all students were required to take in the University System of Georgia. And while I try to understand the Writing Lab's pedagogical praxis of focusing on grammar through the testing requirement, that reasoning does not excuse the lasting impact that it had on fellow students and me. While I understand the ideas concerning grammatical correctness, I developed a personal anxiety with grammar as I tried to move from a working-class, North Georgia family into the conversation of higher education. Dalton State's faculty and administration failed to show awareness of the needs of students transitioning into college. Dalton State failed to listen.

As I've thought back through my undergraduate experience with a sense of awareness, listening to my feelings and thoughts associated with the experience, it would be dishonest to not highlight that I write my description of Dalton State and the Writing Lab with the upmost admiration and love for the faculty who volunteer their time to work in the lab. Since nearly all of the staffers during my time attending Dalton State were English professors, I had a relationship with many of them, and I would not be

anywhere near as successful academically as I am without those women and men. I'm indebted to them. But my Dalton State experience, positive and negative, is vastly different from Western Carolina's tutoring praxis.

In my first semester, the WaLC had a steady stream of students constantly passing through its doors. Students were ready to help other students as soon as they arrived. Tutoring sessions ranging from English to Chemistry were constantly underway. Faculty members from English classes were nowhere to be seen, which helped create an environment that allowed students to fully engage with one another. As I began tutoring my fellow students, I soon realized that many were willing to disclose concerns they had, but others seemed standoffish, wanting me to simply correct their essays. Only one computer sat in a corner of the room where most writing tutoring took place. It was only used on the few occasions when a student did not bring a copy of his or her essay. The emphasis was on human interaction, students engaging students in the common struggles we have all had. Of course, as with any place, the WaLC had its slow times, but compared to Dalton State, the activity of the WaLC was vastly different.

The stark contrast between the two tutoring centers made me keenly aware of two different approaches to tutoring writing. And it's through this contrast that this thesis began. I started thinking about the reasons behind why these two tutoring centers are so different. While I understand that these differences are based on the college or university's focus, I also found that these two centers engage students quite differently. Dalton State placed an emphasis on faculty running the writing center. And while it may have been unintentional, the college sent the message that writing required faculty to tutor students; students could not tutor each other. Within this message, the college



limited the level of engagement that students were able to have in tutoring. Western Carolina, on the other hand, clearly found students were able to take control of their own work and education. After all, student empowerment, their ability to take control of their own work and education, is the underlying message of peer tutoring. But even more so, I found Western Carolina created an opportunity for students to engage and listen to one another.

When I tutored in the WaLC, I realized being able to listen is the most difficult but essential quality tutors can have. The following pages are my attempt to explore listening and how it relates to writing center work. I use Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening theory in order to understand the deep role listening plays for tutors. For Ratcliffe, rhetorical listening provides an opportunity for people to understand themselves in relation to underlying narratives: "*rhetorical listening* signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture" (17, emphasis in original). I use the term narrative to provide a deeper understanding of how people, texts, and cultures are constructed. By viewing tutoring locations as cultures, rhetorical listening allows for a person to develop a deeper sense of the ways Dalton State and Western Carolina differ. Rather than simply relate listening to hearing the noise generated by each location, rhetorical listening asks listeners to hear the underpinnings of each location: what each center represents, how they are constructed, and how a person interacts with each center. Even more so, rhetorical listening provides an opportunity for tutors to better understand their tutees. Each person in a tutoring session represents different narratives that impact the session: who they are, what got them there, and what they represent. These narratives help shape

the conversation between tutor and tutee. Understanding how various narratives influence tutoring underscores this thesis.

In the following chapters, I explore Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening theory in relation to writing center work. My opening chapter connects Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening with writing center scholarship. I take into account how other writing center scholars discuss listening and how Ratcliffe's theory closely connects and expands current writing center theory and praxis. In my second chapter, I work to show how current tutoring practices influence tutors by making them aware of the various cultures and identities at work in writing centers. In my closing chapter, I use my own account of practicing rhetorical listening in a tutoring session to help show how tutors might practice listening rhetorically.

It's important to note that rhetorical listening is a deeply personal process that cannot be seen unless a person describes how they listen in detail. Therefore, many of the following pages focus on my own experiences with rhetorical listening in order to help show how it might be a beneficial practice for other writing center researchers to explore. My account represents only one possible way a person may practice rhetorical listening. Since each person understands their own identity in a unique way, how I make connections through rhetorical listening may not be the way another person in the same situation would make connections. However, in exploring the individual aspects of listening comes a deeper understanding of how identities impact one another. I hope more writing center researchers will undertake their own explorations of rhetorical listening in order to provide a deeper understanding of how tutor identities influence the students they interact with on a daily basis.

## CHAPTER ONE – CONNECTING THE ETHOS: MERGING WRITING CENTER LISTENING WITH RHETORICAL LISTENING

*WCs and classrooms should not be places where social activism and change are the first order of the learning process, but those spaces do not exist as vacuums free from the influence of history and the physics of economic, social, cultural, and political dynamics. Markers of identity and their politics do not disappear or recede into the background in a supposedly neutral zone of teaching and learning... we need to be wary of the ways pedagogy reifies wider institutional structures of oppression.*  
—Harry C. Denny

As the epigraph suggests, writing centers are microcosms where the individual identities of a campus merge into one setting, creating a specific location for such identities to be explored. In his article “Writing Centers and Politics of Community, Identity, and Social Justice,” Harry C. Denny, Director of the Writing Lab at Purdue University, finds that writing centers serve as places where tutor and tutee identities—their personal narratives of gender, race, class, and sexuality—merge into an opportunity for critical reflection. These identities, the experiences that develop tutors into who they are, provide an avenue for tutors to understand how their narratives influence the students they encounter:

When tutors reflect on and disclose their own experiences with negotiating place and voice in college life, they demystify the process, but they also must speak with awareness that their narratives provide one among an infinite number of possibilities, that other students have equally important experiences that make possible different realities. (Denny 61)

The awareness Denny discusses focuses on each tutor's ability to understand who she is and how that understanding differs from the experiences of the tutee with whom she works. Tutoring provides a safe place for tutors and tutees to practice identities, primarily an academic one. Writing center work's ability to reshape a person's identity comes from a liberatory understanding of writing centers.

Denny's ideas seem directly linked to those Tilly and John Warnock establish in their article "Liberatory Writing Centers: Restoring Authority to Writers." The Warnocks focus their scholarship on understanding the role tutoring plays in tutees and tutors<sup>1</sup> being able to view themselves in relation to the language used in sessions. They describe how tutors and tutees are able to use language in a tutoring session that provides power to the tutee and allows them to better control their environments. Essentially, tutors and tutees are able to understand that they control language rather than language controlling them. For the Warnocks, writing centers derive credibility from their ability to provide space for tutors to examine how the language they use shapes a tutoring session:

Teachers [tutors] in writing centers know, as lecturers in and teachers of graduate seminars may not, that these abilities turn out to be not skills in the usual sense, but attitudes that invite revision—revision of the self...revision of the language by which the self comes to terms with the universe, revision of the methods which put these terms into action, and finally revision of the world which in turn defines the self. (17)

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<sup>1</sup> In their essay, the Warnocks specifically use the term "teachers" to address those that work in writing centers. However, as the field has progressed into a peer-based system, their ideas for teachers directly align with the current idea of a tutor allowing their student to generate ideas rather than being instructed.

The revision discussed by the Warnocks develops from an individual's awareness of language's power. Writing centers invite tutors and tutees to freely examine the world through language and to act based on their findings. For this examination to occur, however, the Warnocks argue that tutors be "[people] who assist writers by listening and reading" (18). When tutors listen to how language in tutoring sessions affects their interactions with tutees, they are better situated to provide a space in which language can be used to provide authority to tutees rather than to limit a student's ability. The negative language a tutee might use when facing a difficult assignment (i.e. "I'm not smart enough") limits how that tutee views their abilities. If the tutee cannot move beyond negative language, then the tutee likely cannot achieve a successful outcome. Therefore, when a tutor listens to how negative language may limit a tutee's success, the tutor possesses the ability to shift a session's language to a more positive tone. In doing so, the tutor also understands how her own language influences tutees. Through listening, the tutor "revises" how language limits a tutee. In order for a deep understanding of how language influences sessions, writing center professionals need to move beyond common assertions concerning listening.

Stephen North, one of the most well-known writing center scholars, provides a pointed example of writing center scholarship's common approach to listening. North, in his seminal work, "The Idea of a Writing Center," states: "we [writing center professionals] can ask writers to compose while we listen, or we can compose aloud, and the writers can watch and listen" (443). North's listening simply addresses the idea that when one person talks, the other person listens. Listening, for North, invites those

involved in a tutoring session to engage in a discourse concerning the material covered in the session:

Nearly everyone who writes likes—and needs—to talk about his or her writing, preferably to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too. Maybe in a perfect world, all writers would have their own reader auditor...who would not only listen but draw them out, ask them questions they would not think to ask themselves. (439-440)

Within this subtle framework, North separates listening into its own action within a tutoring session, but the reader never understands what it means to “really listen.” North’s description of listening fails to recognize the complex aspects described by the Warnocks and called for by Julie A. Bokser.

In her 2005 article, “Pedagogies of Belonging: Listening to Students and Peers,” Bokser asks writing center professionals to “consciously engage a more intentional pedagogy of belonging that considers how and why others listen, how one’s self listens, and how these conditions affect what gets said” (59). Bokser’s call comes from North and other scholars’ avoidance of listening beyond an occasional nod to its requirement in tutoring, rarely moving past addressing how tutors should be attentive to tutees. Tutor listening, however, should be explored as a complex practice, rather than simple attentiveness in a session.

Listening allows tutors an opportunity to engage with their tutees. It asks tutors to consider how the academic setting influences students at all academics levels. As Bosker asserts: “the tutor needs to understand the paradoxical ways in which writing

and academic literacy more generally are instruments of belonging that can constrain as well as liberate” (43). Writing centers provide a space where the more commonly marginalized students are able to come and engage with the academic community. The writing center then serves as a safe place for these students to delve into their work without fear of being critiqued by those from whom they feel distanced. As a result, writing centers liberate students from the requirements placed on them by the larger institution. Students are able to more fully develop their own identity in relation to the academic identity generated in classes. However, in order for tutees to experience this liberation through tutoring, tutors must be able to recognize the ways language—spoken and unspoken—shapes tutees.

In order for tutors to better understand listening’s possibilities, I offer Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening as a pedagogical practice. Working within Ratcliffe’s framework, I define rhetorical listening as a rhetorical perspective that asks individuals to be open to changing themselves by consciously engaging how their own experiences differ and align with another person’s. In doing so, rhetorical listening situates a person so that they understand how these differences influence a conversation. Rhetorical listening provides an opportunity to turn the liberatory possibilities of language into action. It focuses on tutors being aware of tutees’ individual concerns. In order to help develop the connection between rhetorical listening and writing center pedagogy, in the next section I explore the possibilities of rhetorical listening by interpreting Ratcliffe’s theory through writing center scholarship.

### **Rhetorical Listening in Writing Center Work**

Ratcliffe, in her now often cited article, “Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Intervention and a ‘Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct,’” classifies rhetorical listening as a process that places individuals within a context that allows understanding of various situations and texts (204). Rhetorical listening moves tutors into an awareness of the issues beyond a tutee’s written essay. In writing center praxis, tutors focusing purely on the text, rather than the writer, create a dilemma in which the tutor may address the same issues in the same manner with each student, regardless of how a student reacts. When session practices become overly standardized, tutors fail to understand the needs of individual students. When this failure occurs, a tutoring session may result in a harmful experience for tutees by making sessions useless from their perspective. Rhetorical listening, however, requires tutors to address each tutee with a sense of openness. Rather than focus solely on structure or a thesis statement with each student, addressing each tutee separately allows for tutors to be in tune with the needs of a specific student. Tutors must be willing to change their praxis based on each tutee.

Steve Sherwood, current director of the William L. Adams Center for Writing at Texas Christian University, in his article “Portrait of the Tutor as an Artist: Lessons No One Can Teach” discusses the need for tutors to address students with a sense of awareness, albeit through a different route:

a distracted [non-listening] tutor who fails to recognize the hidden complexity and difficulty in a project may attempt to use tutoring or writing strategies that have worked on past projects—only to share the writer’s puzzlement and frustration when these strategies flounder. (60)

Sherwood, while arguing for an “artistic” approach, finds tutors need to be able to



respond or “improvise” within any given situation. In essence, Sherwood argues for the rhetorical position of openness that Ratcliffe’s theory provides. Rhetorical listening, however, goes much deeper than Sherwood’s acknowledgment by requiring listeners to listen beyond the concerns of a specific requirement. While rhetorical listening joins in with Sherwood’s call to “recognize the complexity and difficulty in a given project” (60), Ratcliffe’s theory asks listeners to take into account the issues with an assignment and consider the person experiencing difficulties: who the tutee is as a person, what the tutee represents, and how the tutee’s experiences influence her work. Rather than simply offering awareness, rhetorical listening requires listeners to examine and explore what they hear.

Ratcliffe offers an in-depth understanding of rhetorical listening as an invention process:

rhetorical listening turns hearing (a reception process) into invention (a production process)...Second, rhetorical listening turns the realm of hearing into a larger space, one encompassing all discursive forms, not just oral ones. Third, rhetorical listening turns intent back on the listener, focusing on listening with intent, not for it. Fourth, rhetorical listening turns the meaning of the text into something larger than itself, certainly larger than the intent of the speaker/writer, in that rhetorical listening locates a text as part of a larger cultural logics. And fifth, rhetorical listening turns rhetoric’s traditional focus on the desires of the speaker/writer into a harmonics and/or dissonance of the desires of both the speaker/writer and the listener. (220)

These five “turns” move listening from an attentive process to an engagement with ideas/text/people beyond the page. Examining writing center discourse’s various acts of listening as rhetorical listening through Ratcliffe’s five “turns” allows for a more coherent ethos and logos between the discipline’s theory and praxis.

With her first “turn,” Ratcliffe’s understanding of rhetorical listening functions as a process of hearing, evaluating, and acting. As a listener turns an ear toward a deeper attentiveness to the reasons behind the language of a conversation, she hears the language in order to understand the complex meanings behind each term. Rather than accept language as medium for exchange, the listener attempts to hear so that new steps might be taken in a conversation, turning language into a “production process” (220). When a tutor and tutee listen to one another in order to understand each other’s perspective concerning an assignment, listening becomes how new writing ideas are produced. Rhetorical listening provides a positive way forward for tutors when they encounter negative sessions. When tutors understand hearing as a process for “interpretive invention,” they possess the ability to transform the ways a tutee sees or understands an assignment and how the tutee views herself (220). When tutors listen for the meanings behind language, they take into account how a tutee’s experiences within an academic setting may not represent a narrative of success and belonging. Rather, the tutor may hear connections of how a tutee feels she does not fit into academic culture.

When I sit down to work with a fellow student on their assignment, Ratcliffe’s first “turn” of rhetorical listening situates me in a position to adjust my tutoring practices based on what I hear. If the tutee I am working with willingly offers ideas, it is my

responsibility to hear the various possibilities of those ideas and help turn them into the best possible outcome. Similarly, if I hear a student's anxiety or concern, it becomes my responsibility to shift my tutoring praxis to work within the framework of that anxiety. By hearing the anxiety, I turn my praxis into opportunity to better meet the tutee's needs. My role in the conversation becomes shaped by what I hear. However, in order for this turn to take place, I must be aware of my tutee in a broader context beyond a single assignment.

Ratcliffe's second "turn" recognizes the larger cultural and situational dynamics taking place within a tutoring session. Ratcliffe explains: "rhetorical listening turns the realm of hearing into a larger space, one encompassing all discursive forms, not just oral ones" (220). By addressing all the ways in which a person may communicate, a tutor is able to deepen their understanding of a student's concerns. When a tutee enters into the writing center, she represents the larger cultural group that she inhabits, a very personal, individualistic identification. Bokser's article, mentioned earlier, begins to interpret writing center listening through a larger cultural lens. Her article specifically details how her tutors work with English as a Second Language (ESL) students, by helping them navigate the culture present in higher education, and as a result, she argues: "the issues ESL students face are 'deep,' political, and, often, ambiguous. Tutors need to see such discussion as integral to tutoring, and to see both themselves and ESL students as capable of such discussions" (58). Of course, Bokser's argument is true. Rhetorical listening, however, aids her point by recognizing the "deep, political, and, often, ambiguous" experience marginalized students have (58). When listening becomes a process to hear the culture and political concerns of students, tutors see

people rather than papers. These concerns are likely most noticeable through ESL students through their accents, heard on the page and in conversation. So when tutors hear the language of ESL students, listening rhetorically asks them to move the heard dialogue into a more full understanding of the experience that student may have. In doing so, a tutor becomes much more aware of how her own language and actions may influence the ESL tutee. Tutors are then prepared to help ESL students better navigate the issues they face. While this practice may cause a tutor to make unnecessary assumptions concerning a tutee, it allows room for moments of marginalization to come to the forefront and helps tutors address these moments, rather than overlook a student's needs. As such, understanding Ratcliffe's second turn through a writing center lens allows writing center professionals to better continue the work of "bridg[ing] and scaffold[ing] others' access to academic discourse" (Denny 55). For bridge building to take place, tutors must approach tutoring sessions with the goal of hearing these issues.

Ratcliffe's third "turn" explains the necessary mindset tutors must have in order to develop more aware tutoring practices. Ratcliffe dictates: "rhetorical listening turns intent back on the listener, focusing on listening with intent, not for it" (220). Instead of purely listening for the tutee's ideas concerning an assignment, a tutor, when listening with intent, makes a conscious effort to better recognize the tutee beyond the words of their assignment. Listening with intent generates a process of understanding rather than a process of correction. Muriel Harris, founder of the Purdue Online Writing Lab, in her text *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Center Conference*, hints at tutors listening with intent. Harris addresses listening by negotiating the practice from a tutor's perspective.

Influenced by Donald Murray, Harris stipulates: “Important is the role of listener...in prewriting conferences, the teacher asks about students’ lives and what they know. The teacher here is a friendly listener, interested in each student as an individual, a person who may have something to say” (38). Harris’s statement asks the tutor to listen to who the tutee is as a person. Rhetorical listening, however, progresses Harris’s listening principle of creating a friendly setting towards an environment of understanding the specific needs of a tutee. For Ratcliffe, listening with intent moves into understanding the tutee.

Listening with intent to who a tutee is before examining a tutee’s text allows the tutor to better initiate and converse with a tutee based on that tutee’s experiences. When I first began tutoring, it seemed essential to purely focus on the text. While I had been taught to be cordial and welcoming to each tutee, it was uncomfortable to engage with a fellow student about their personal life. However, my discomfort was minimal compared to the emotions being felt by a few of my tutees. In one session, my tutee informed me that her paper was due before the day was over. I, engaging with the text rather than the person, made a few revision ideas that brought out the underlying emotions my tutee was dealing with at the time. Unwisely, I suggested rather broad revisions that would take time to complete when the student did not have any time to spare. Rather than simply create a friendly mood as Harris suggests, if I had listened with intent to understand my tutee’s experiences that produced the essay positioned between us, I could have shaped my revision ideas in a more helpful manner.

When a tutor accounts for the experiences and context in which a tutee produces her essay, the tutor works to accomplish rhetorical listening’s fourth “turn.” Ratcliffe

explains: “rhetorical listening turns the meaning of the text into something larger than itself...rhetorical listening locates a text as part of a larger cultural logics” (220). Within a normal conversation, rhetorical listening works to understand the cultural influences shaping a person’s argument. However, when a tutor works to locate the cultural influences shaping a tutee’s work, she works to understand how academic culture and culture beyond the institution construct a student’s essay. When tutors perform this task, they try to understand how institutional expectations found in academia form a tutee’s thinking about their ability to write. As a result, they may open themselves up to listen to what an assignment means in terms of accomplishment in its completion or partial completion. In addition to this institutional focused explanation of Ratcliffe’s point, Andrew Rihn, in his article “Challenging Privilege and Confronting Racism in the Consultation,” offers an example where if rhetorical listening had been practiced, it could have helped recognize cultural logics in a more beneficial manner.

Rihn, a writing tutor at the time, finds tutors should address cultural issues in tutoring sessions. He explains:

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. (n. pag.)

Rihn provides a narrative describing a tutoring session in which he tutored a fellow Caucasian student concerning a paper validating Black English Vernacular. Before the session began, Rihn informed the student that because of the topic and the inherent

biases in Standard English, the essay probably presented some inherently racist elements. He locates the student's text within the larger context of language and cultural norms. And by doing so, Rihn and the student are more aware of the broader contexts that may present themselves in the essay. As Rihn points out, the student "had normalized her experience of growing up white and middle-class and shifted that experience onto every potential reader" (n. pag). However, by addressing possible issues from the outset, Rihn fails to listen to his tutee. Even though Rihn's tutee attempted to understand Black English Vernacular through her particular experience as a White person, Rihn's location of her essay within a racist context, without having any verification from the text or student before his assertion, could have misguided the tutee and the session. For rhetorical listening to work, a listener must allow the cultural connections to generate from within a conversation. Rihn should have used the essay and session conversation as a place to explore cultural implications. He paid more attention to the topic than the student, a practice rhetorical listening works to prevent. Rhetorical listening allows for tutoring to include an "ethic of diversity," but it requires that conversations of race develop from within a tutoring session's conversation, rather than presupposing their necessity for the tutee.

The final "turn" rhetorical listening makes, according to Ratcliffe, focuses on two people in conversation with one another trying to navigate a space that recognizes and meets the needs of the speaker and listener. She posits: "rhetorical listening turns rhetoric's traditional focus on the desires of the speaker/writer into a harmonics and/or dissonance of the desires of both the speaker/writer and the listener" (220). Rhetorical listening accounts for what the speaker and the listener desire. As such, it works to find

a balance between the tutor's goals and the tutee's goals. For a positive tutoring session to take place, both tutor and tutee are required to try and understand the intent with which each one discusses the ideas of a session. When a tutor attempts to address the needs of the tutee beyond the assignment, the tutor works from a more conscious understanding of the session. Tutees must also be receptive to the information they receive, and the tutor must listen to how the tutees respond. By doing so, tutor and tutee create a balance between themselves.

I know from my time tutoring, when a tutee willingly discusses and considers the suggestions made by a tutor and the tutor shapes those suggestions based on how a tutee responds, they create a positive tutoring session. Tutor and tutee must work from a place of mutual respect and understanding, developing a context in which all ideas and opinions are openly discussed and considered. A positive tutoring scenario does not seek to limit input from either participant; it works to ensure tutor and tutee both feel heard. If I sit down with a tutee and we openly discuss the merits of each other's ideas, we converse from a perspective seeking to understand one another. If I suggest a paragraph needs further development and my tutee responds by acknowledging my suggestion and offering her interpretation of my idea, then both our desires are taken into account. When a "harmony" develops between tutor and tutee, true understanding takes place. However, these harmonious sessions are not always the case.

As any tutor can account for, tutoring sessions often involve seemingly standoffish scenarios and develop from a "dissonance" between a tutor and tutee's desires. Rian A. Brarmann in the article "Are They Listening?" addresses a standoffish scenario from a tutor's perspective. Brarmann presents a case in which a student, sent



to tutoring by her professor, counters his every suggestion concerning the quality work already present in the student's text, going as far as claiming she, the tutee, "didn't have to be here" (10). Brarmann opened the session by discussing the most effective portions of the tutee's essay with the intent of building a positive foundation from which to move forward. However, following the tutee's statement, he decided to reengage the student concerning areas that the student's assignment needed revision: "My goal was to at least give her an idea of what areas might need improvement. After all, even though her comments were often negative, they at least offered some evidence to me that she was listening" (10). And while it seems Brarmann demonstrated the inherent tutoring ethos that seeks to engage students in a way that is beneficial for them, he comments: "I just listened to remarks, offered my opinions, and kept going" (10). Brarmann listened to the student, but did not hear her. He carried on with his own desires to offer revision ideas instead of engaging with the tutee's desires. Brarmann essentially ignored the tutee's concerns in order to share information. And while he acknowledges that the tutee returned later with a revised version of the same assignment, he also brings to attention that her attitude in the session had not changed (11). Brarmann finds encouragement in the fact that the tutee revised her essay with ideas from the previous session. However, he only helped make the tutee's assignment better. He did not rhetorically listen to the tutee's desires for the session. He failed to recognize the likely marginalized context she worked from due to her professor's tutoring requirement. Had Brarmann taken the time to rhetorically listen to the tutee's language, verbal and nonverbal, he may have been able to reframe the session so that

the tutee's feeling of marginalization was taken into account. As a result, a more beneficial session for Brarmann and the tutee could have developed.

Rhetorical listening offers tutors and writing center professionals the means by which to engage students. It's a common notion that the goal of writing centers is to "make better writers." However, far too often, writing center theory and praxis only hints at seeking to understand the students who use tutoring services. Rhetorical listening allows tutors to engage their fellow students. When tutors rhetorically listen to their tutees, they engage in a pedagogy that welcomes diversity, fosters ideas, and liberates students from the academic system that marginalizes their experiences. Whether it be Bokser's article, Rihn's overzealous attempt to bring cultural issues to the forefront, or Brarmann's dealing with a confrontational tutee, writing center scholarship hinges on the desire to help tutors find a way to address the many issues present in the writing center microcosm. Rhetorical listening fulfills that desire.

## CHAPTER TWO – PEDAGOGY, AWARENESS, AND SHIFTING POWER DOWN THE INSTITUTE HIERARCHY

*Once faculty lose the omnipotence ascribed to them, they become more interesting and useful to students...by reinterpreting the authority of the faculty, students learn to recognize their own powers as learners and to invest authority in each other. And what this leads to is not so much a better delivery system but a student culture that takes learning and intellectual activity seriously.*

—Harvey Kail and John Trimbur

*I was not prepared to have writing center philosophy seep into my very being—to have my subsequent interactions in and out of the writing center governed by a creed that turns accepted hierarchy structures on its head.*

—Soma Kedia

Before continuing into the more serious aspects of this chapter, I want to offer a moment of levity to help provide context. I once had a student tell me she wanted to be an exotic dancer—she used another term at the time. I know, it seems absurd that a student would make that statement to her tutor, but pressure and the broader academy tend to make students think, do, and say things they normally would not in regular conversation. My fellow student's History essay was due in a few hours, and she seemed lost as to her next step. The assignment had morphed into a metaphor for her academic abilities and her life. She no longer viewed the assignment as a simple task; she moved the assignment into a false category that would determine her place in the university. Of course, I can only guess as to the reasons for her statement. Stress seems the most obvious; when deadlines approach, student anxiety increases. But I am sure other experiences from her past that I have no way of knowing also contributed. As a fellow student, however, I connected with her anxiety.

Even if I did not understand her anxiety as a peer through my own anxieties concerning writing, this example demonstrates that the student viewed me as her peer. She did not view me as someone with information she did not have; she simply understood the tutoring relationship as an opportunity to express concerns and ideas with a fellow student. She certainly would not have made such a statement to a professor or teacher, at least I hope not. I know for certain that no amount of proper training could have fully prepared me for that moment.

I hope I responded with a professional manner, but I'm nearly certain that I had a confused look on my face. When I mention this tutoring session to my fellow peer tutors, they laugh. They all have their own stories that stay with them from their time as tutors, but none with the same startling admission. Stories like mine almost certainly could never fit into a training manual, but my story presents an interesting idea concerning the reasons behind moments fueled by anxiety and lack of self worth. The anxiety displayed in tutoring sessions results from an institutional hierarchy found on college campuses, and writing center pedagogy plays a part in how tutors are able to help tutee's work through their hierarchal experiences.

Tutors, through peer tutoring, engage with their fellow students in questioning. They ask questions concerning how a text's argument can be more effective, questions about the writing process, and even questions concerning why a certain requirement must be followed. However, these questions, particularly the questions of why, are different for tutors compared to tutees. Tutors, as writing center representatives, represent the institutional concerns of the school for which they work. In the opening scenario, I clearly represented Western Carolina as an employee in its Writing and

Learning Commons. My fellow student came to a designated space for tutoring services sanctioned by the university. As a worker in that space, I was required to navigate the requirements placed on tutoring by the broader institution. From an institutional perspective, tutors are expected to tutor so that they match the university's expectations for what tutoring should or should not do. On the other hand, peer tutors must also represent the student body from which they originate. Before students ever become peer tutors, they must first sit alongside fellow students as equals in the college experience. Yet once students become a part of the university's academic labor force as tutors, an unavoidable hierarchy sets in, placing the tutor into the role of institutional representative. How tutors navigate the university's concerns in relation to their fellow students' concerns provides a window into understanding the role rhetorical listening plays in a tutor's actions. In order to fully understand the conflict at work, an understanding of how the discipline's discourse has attempted to navigate the hierarchy between professors, tutors, and tutees must be addressed.

### **The Power Dilemma in Writing Center Pedagogy**

Tutoring pedagogy is as diverse as the students who walk through writing center doors. Peter Vandenberg, in his article "Lessons of Inscription: Tutor Training and the 'Professional Conversation,'" details writing center pedagogy's long and winding road. Vandenberg brings pedagogical awareness to the forefront, focusing on the values tutors represent in tutoring sessions:

We [writing center professionals] conceptualize directions for writing centers—the actual ones we work in and the virtual, generalized figures in our scholarship—our understanding of tutors as 'students' and our

interaction with them as 'education' may mask the ways they sometimes serve simply and without reflection as extensions of values and desires written deeply into the institution, into us. (60)

As Vandenberg highlights, tutors reflect the values and desires of the writing centers and administrators for whom they work. Tutors, much like administrators, work within a framework that at times is beyond their control. Writing center administrators and tutors are stuck between serving a curriculum set forth by the university and serving the students who need help. This dilemma specifically causes concerns when the institutional curriculum does not always match a student's needs. For instance, when a student from southern Appalachia uses language specific to that region, should the tutor turn that language into Standard English or help the student explore that language in order to find a deeper understanding? How a tutor handles this situation represents which side of the hierarchy—the student versus university dilemma—that she is on. Of course, a tutor, as I experienced during my own time tutoring, will likely want to do both tasks, helping the tutee explore their own language and convert the language to Standard English. However, one task will be the primary focus within a tutoring session. As Vandenberg details, the values that a student demonstrates in a tutoring session represent the values set forth by a particular writing center and the university in which the writing center operates. The struggle a tutor experiences in trying to navigate a tutoring session mirrors the struggle writing centers have encountered in their pedagogical history.

Writing centers have battled their place within the university hierarchy since before the mid-1980s. The 1980s, however, showed a shift towards collaborative, peer-

based approaches in writing center work through articles and other texts by Kenneth Bruffee, Muriel Harris, Stephen North and John Trimbur. Elizabeth Boquet highlights this pivotal moment in writing center pedagogy in her text *Noise from the Writing Center*. Pinpointing 1984, Boquet argues that essays by North, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” and Bruffee, “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” moved writing centers’ social dynamics towards a community-based approach and began theorizing on peer tutoring in relation to the university as a whole (28). This shift towards peer tutoring, the community-based approach, came after a tenuous mirroring of the traditional, curriculum-centered tutoring style—represented by Dalton State in this thesis’s introduction.

Power and control have been at the discipline’s center from its earlier days working within the “current-traditional” or “curriculum-based” pedagogy, which places the tutor in a situation *filling* each student with knowledge—traditionally an instructor’s role. In the curriculum-based approach, tutors “transmit knowledge through an act of instillation: they are installed in the existing power grid” (Kail and Trimbur 8). The “power grid,” as Harvey Kail and John Trimbur discuss in their 1987 article, “The Politics of Peer-Tutoring,” locates tutors as receivers then transmitters: “they [tutors] receive knowledge from their tutor trainers, turn and pass this knowledge on to their peers” (8). In this approach, students are meant to absorb information rather than ask questions. The current-traditional approach more directly attempts to control the information tutors and students are able to share with one another.

Harry C. Denny, in his article “Writing Centers and Politics of Community, Identity, and Social Justice,” provides an example of how the current-traditional model

depends on control through his history of Stony Brook's writing center. Denny focuses on how tutoring praxis was controlled by institutional concerns rather than student need: "tutorials focused on students' work beyond the writing program because support for its [Stony Brook's] courses were banned (administration thought tutorial support enabled instructors to shirk what it thought was their rightful obligation)" (56). The institution's concerns outweighed the concerns of students needing help with their coursework. Interpreting Stony Brook's history, it seems clear at the early stages of the then "clinic<sup>2</sup>," Stony Brook's administration understood their responsibility was to dictate the acceptable boundaries of tutoring. Denny goes on to argue that as the writing center shifted away from this model, "it shifted from...high-stakes gatekeeping" (56). The "gatekeeping" terminology implies that the current-traditional model kept students from accessing the practices of higher education, using tutors as guardians of the gates.

As a result of this pedagogical approach, tutors are placed in a position that separates them from other students. They become a student group with a collective knowledge given to them by administration. Therefore, they must strictly provide the institutional information to students who use tutoring services. Kail and Trimbur recognize how this mirroring of a traditional pedagogy moves student tutors away from their peers: "the curriculum-based model makes the peer tutors an extension of the faculty...remov[ing] tutors from the student community by installing them a power station or two above their peers, a step away from student culture" (8). Within this

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<sup>2</sup> During its early years, Stony Brook's Writing Center was known as a "clinic," a term that implies student writing needed to be fixed and the workers in the clinic possessed the skills to make corrections. Students were not provided authority over their own work. Under Peter Elbow's leadership, however, Stony Brook shifted towards a focus on student need.



traditional approach, authorities hold knowledge, which relegates the persons not within the hierarchy to unknowledgeable categories. The group lacking knowledge, the students using tutoring services, must then be informed of their errors and instructed on how to correct them. However, writing center scholars, primarily since the 1980s, have tried to find a way to counteract this power structure in order to place knowledge within the hands of students through developing peer-based tutoring models.

While peer-based tutoring models vary in implementation, they all seek to establish equality through collaboration in knowledge throughout a broader student body. When a student sits down with another student as an equal, the tutoring session depends on knowledge that they share in conversation with one another. When practicing peer tutoring, a tutor does not inform students that they have a right or wrong answer. Rather, the tutor works under the assumption that their fellow student likely has the answer to any question. Therefore, the tutor no longer has the responsibility to teach students, but instead engages in questions concerning an assignment together. As a result, the peer model helps show tutees they are just as capable of engaging and developing knowledge as their instructors. Clearly this represents a shift from the previous system, as Kail and Trimbur point out: “to replace generation and transmission with conversation is to challenge some of the basic beliefs and practices in higher education” (9). Writing center scholarship’s pedagogical transition from curriculum-based tutoring towards peer tutoring challenges traditional instructional practices by providing power to each individual student.

Peer-based tutoring attempts to counter the traditional university style of instruction by working on a volunteer basis by allowing students to control a session’s

content (Kail and Trimbur 9). Rather than writing centers functioning as “fix-it shops,” peer tutoring allows students to take their own initiative in questioning assignments and their own work. As such, peer-based models reconfigure the power instructors or those viewed as keepers of knowledge—tutors in the curriculum-based model—have within an educational system. When institutional power dynamics shift, the students lacking power gain control over the university. However, peer-based models still deal with the institutional pressures placed on writing centers and their staffs.

Writing center scholars’ pedagogical struggle with academia’s institutional hierarchy presents itself at the forefront of tutor training. The third edition of *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, published in 2002, opens with Leigh Ryan addressing the role writing centers ask tutors to fill. Ryan lists five points that instruct tutors concerning what it means to be a professional in the writing center:

1. Teachers need to be sure they are evaluating a student’s own work; therefore, never write any part of a students paper.
2. Never comment negatively to students about a teacher’s teaching methods, assignments, personality, or grading policies.
3. Never suggest a grade for a paper.
4. Never criticize the grade a teacher has given a paper.
5. Honor the confidentiality of the tutoring relationship. (1-3)

For Ryan to open her highly used, International Writing Center Association recommended training manual with a discussion of the “never” aspects of tutoring, she shows that a conversation about power foregrounds tutoring. Essentially, Ryan draws a box around a tutor’s roles and instructs tutors to know their place—somewhere below

teachers<sup>3</sup>. By introducing institutional hierarchy at tutor training's outset, tutors are keenly aware of the role they play within the hierarchy. This hierarchal awareness makes tutors more likely to understand the marginalized role other students may experience within the university, a sense of awareness that I came to during my own training.

At Western Carolina University's Writing and Learning Commons (WaLC), graduate writing tutors are provided a version<sup>4</sup> of Ryan's text to help facilitate their introduction into tutoring. Along with the text, tutors are also provided a training manual developed by the WaLC's administration. The training manual includes a schedule, which requires tutors to read Ryan's text during their first week of work. (WaLC Staff 7). As a result of this requirement, WaLC tutors begin their journey into tutoring by being told what not to do. What might be a WaLC tutor's first experience with writing center scholarship places him or her into Ryan's tutoring box. But the connection between the WaLC and Ryan goes deeper than introducing tutors to Ryan's tutoring restrictions.

Ryan's text directly correlates with key points presented in the WaLC's training manual. In the section titled "What Tutors are Not Expected to," the manual strictly states tutors are not expected to "suggest a grade for a paper," a statement directly related to Ryan's third point (5). It seems that a tutor offering positive support to a student concerning quality of an essay in some way offers a substitute for a grade. If I

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<sup>3</sup> To be clear, I'm not arguing that tutors in anyway need to supersede teachers. While both positions help students, tutors and teachers each have different functions within a student's academic experience. Ryan's guidelines, however, develop a sense of awareness in tutors to help them better connect with their tutees.

<sup>4</sup> WaLC provides the fifth edition of Ryan's text to tutors. The fifth edition (2009) and sixth edition (2016) continue Ryan's tutoring role navigation in the opening chapter. I use the third edition to show the continuity of the conversation shaping the WaLC's pedagogy.

offer positive support that a student's work is "good" or "on track," then I am offering my own assessment without providing a specific letter. The manual goes on to state that tutors are not expected to "comment negatively to clients about instructors' teaching methods, assignments, personalities, or grading policies" (5). Here, the training manual directly ties in with Ryan's second point, even going so far as to use the exact same language as Ryan's text. These two points, while certainly done in the best effort to avoid conflict between the WaLC, tutors, students, and professors, undoubtedly support the hierarchy constructed within an institution.

From my introduction to tutoring, I became keenly aware of my role as a tutor. My objective, as dictated by the WaLC and Ryan, was to help students but to not transgress against the power system in place. Even though peer tutoring is the pedagogical practice used in the WaLC, as a WaLC employee and university representative, I was not a peer to my fellow students. Since I was not to engage with my peers in peer-like conversations concerning coursework and instructors, my only professional obligation, as Ryan and the WaLC's restrictions dictate, was to mimic the peer role. When restrictions are placed on being a peer, the role can only be partially enacted. I was neither peer nor professional. The institutional hierarchy restricts both terms from being filled in their usual sense, and as a result, tutors have a dislocated identity. They must develop their own understanding of what it means to be a tutor, and in doing so, their awareness of how their actions influence others grows.

My own awareness of my dislocated identity as a tutor manifested itself in a seemingly practical way. The WaLC requires all writing tutors to wear nametags while on duty. Tutees, on the other hand, lack identification. Obviously, this seems like a

courteous policy to help a tutee remember their tutor's name during a session. Required nametags, however, signify a distinct difference between tutor and tutee. Since the tutee lacks a nametag, the nametag transgresses the WaLC's peer-tutoring practice. Identifying tutors as institutional representatives, the nametag places tutors in a category separate from their fellow students. Acknowledging this disparity, I had to choose whether or not I followed the professional duty of wearing my nametag set forth by the WaLC or embraced my peer identity by not wearing the nametag. I chose to more fully be a peer with my fellow students and forgo visually identifying myself with the institution, establishing my own tutor identity by developing a personal interpretation of the terms "peer" and "professional."

I likely would not have been aware of how a nametag visually negates peer pedagogy without the awareness created through my training. I recognize people working in writing centers might overlook nametags as a courtesy. However, in a tutoring session's one-to-one space, the seemingly small detail of a nametag may make a difference in how tutors and tutees interact. If peer pedagogy is to be fulfilled, then writing center practitioners must consciously engage the small differences between being a tutor and being a peer.

### **Shifting Power to Tutors through Rhetorical Listening and Eavesdropping**

Judith Summerfield offers a more accepting understanding of the tutor-student relationship and its role within the hierarchy. In her essay "Writing Centers: A Longview," Summerfield argues that writing center tutees and tutors engage in conversations that challenge authorities. For Summerfield, writing centers represent a community where questions of authority are bound to arise: "As students come

together, they can ask *why* and *why not*... 'Why did instructor X give this paper an A and instructor Y give the same paper a C-? How can writing be a journal if it's graded?'" (66, emphasis in original). She embraces and discusses the questions that arise when students help other students. While these questions may be regarded as simply differences of semantics—how the student defines “journal” might be different than how the teacher defines the term—the difference in definition develops from questions of who has the right to define the term—questions of authority. Summerfield goes on to argue: “These conversations challenge the ‘nature’ of authority and expose underlying values, politics, ideology and epistemology” (67). These hierarchal questions develop in both the tutor and tutee an awareness of the system around them. Even though the tutor is already aware of the system from her training, she must make a decision concerning whether or not to join in the questioning.

I often had a student ask questions concerning assignments: i.e. “Why does the professor want me to write about this topic?” One answer follows the guidelines put into place by Ryan and says the professor has the authority to assign essays as she sees fit. Another answer, however, is to join my fellow student and discuss the reason aloud, questioning together the professor’s authority and transgressing my tutor role set forth earlier by Ryan. However, in order to calculate the difference between these two answers, I must have an awareness of the viewpoints (discourses) at work in the conversation.

The awareness I describe here mirrors the awareness Krista Ratcliffe discusses in her rhetorical listening theory. In her text *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, and Whiteness*, Ratcliffe calls for “standing under” the various discourses that interact

with people on a daily basis (28). Standing under discourses allows a person to objectively try and understand the viewpoints she encounters within a conversation. Ratcliffe further develops this principle as “consciously standing under [understanding] discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular—and very fluid—standpoints” (28). Ratcliffe’s principle allows for a deep analysis of viewpoints before embracing a particular perspective.

Tutors, by consequence of the institutional hierarchy acting upon them, are placed in an unavoidable situation that requires them to practice Ratcliffe’s understanding of engaging with discourses. When tutors and tutees engage in the question posing described above, they take into account the various viewpoints influencing them. When a tutee asks a tutor *why* a professor assigns a particular topic, that tutee engages in questioning the power structure that dictates their required actions in successfully completing an assignment. The tutee knowingly takes into account their own lack of knowledge and juxtaposes their understanding with the perceived viewpoint that the tutor represents the community dictating the answer to their question. Similarly, the tutor’s answer dictates how she interprets the viewpoints acting upon her. If a tutor responds with the answer that a faculty member has the authority to assign any topic, then the tutor seemingly makes the decision to join the hierarchy. The tutor limits the student’s input and simply asserts the professor’s authority. However, if the tutor responds with a different answer of “why do you think the citation is required?” then the tutor recognizes her own viewpoint as a student and joins in a dialogue of knowledge. By allowing the question to continue, the tutor removes herself from the hierarchy.

The argument against such an understanding of a tutor's options hinges on whether or not the tutor is aware of the various forces within tutoring sessions. It seems reasonable to assert that if the leading training manual, Ryan's text, opens by dictating a hierarchy over tutors, then tutors reading the text will undoubtedly amass some familiarity with the larger forces at work. Ratcliffe provides a similar reasoning: "we may not always choose or control the discourses that socialize us; neither may we choose or control our unconscious responses to these discourses. But we can, to a limited degree, articulate our conscious identifications and choose to respond to them (or not)" (30). Tutors, of course, do not control the battle over authority that plays out in the larger field's discourse. However, as an absorber of the discourse, tutors in some way must internalize pedagogical viewpoints and decide how they feel about the presented information. Tutors possess the ability to choose how they respond to the hierarchal conversation at work in tutoring pedagogy, but they must do this by listening in on the professional conversation in which they lack a voice.

Ratcliffe further details this understanding of dealing with information through her theory of rhetorical eavesdropping. In her essay "Eavesdropping as Rhetorical Tactic: History, Whiteness, and Rhetoric," Ratcliffe asserts:

Rhetorical listening...must be considered alongside rhetorical eavesdropping because eavesdropping, as one kind of rhetorical listening, more sharply tunes listeners into the 'private conversation of others,' conversations in which eavesdroppers are not directly addressed. (91)

Working with the common notion of eavesdropping as listening in on another person's conversation, rhetorical eavesdropping situates a person so that she listens into the



viewpoints behind a particular dialogue. Rather than taking a conversation at face value, rhetorical eavesdropping asks listeners to consciously engage the conversations as observers rather than participants. For example, my analysis of Ryan's work takes the position of rhetorical eavesdropper. I analyzed Ryan's presented discourse to tutors by listening into the conversation going on between the scholars in the field, a conversation that goes on behind the scenes of a tutor's day-to-day actions. On the surface, Ryan's assertions simply relate to helping peer tutors function in a professional role. But underneath the basic assertions that she makes is the discipline's long history of navigating various power structures between tutors and the broader institution.

If a tutor analyzes the conversation going on behind presented tutoring guidelines by asking why those requirements are in place and how they impact various people, she becomes engaged with tutoring's complexity. Rather than simply accepting tutoring practices as they are, tutors attempting to go beyond the *text* of tutoring norms develop a keener sense of the problems faced by the discipline. As a result, tutors might be able to better control their own pedagogy and are better prepared to engage each student individually. Such recognition, however, does not mean tutoring becomes easier.

From my own experience, I often found it simpler to negotiate tutoring sessions when I sided with the traditional expectations of instructing rather than questioning. When a student asks a question concerning *why*, the student expects an answer. The system beyond the writing center says that writing center's representatives should provide that student with an answer rather than joining the student in questioning authority. However, as Ratcliffe's quote concerning the decision to respond to

“conscious identifications” or not implies, the more difficult decision when examining the viewpoints impacting a tutoring situation is to side against the normalized power structure (30). When tutors take control of their own identity in relation to the pedagogical conversation and join their fellow students in their questioning, tutors fulfill the discipline’s move toward peer collaboration and help foster a place where students are welcome to be themselves in academia. If I had told my fellow student in this chapter’s opening narrative that her admonishment concerning her discomfort with the instructor, assignment, and future career plans was inappropriate, then I would have turned the interaction into a strictly informational session in which I, claiming what is appropriate or inappropriate, became an arbiter for the institution.

The decision by a tutor to engage as a peer or as a teacher mirrors what Ratcliffe argues will lead to discourses “inform[ing] our politics and ethics” (28). The moment I make the decision to respond as a peer while tutoring, I establish how I interpret writing center scholars’ pedagogical conversation. My personal interpretation of writing center pedagogy and my preference to be a peer influences how I understood the ethics and politics associated with peer tutoring. Ratcliffe furthers this point: “Standing under the discourses of others means first, acknowledging the existence of these discourses; second, listening for (un)conscious presences, absences, and unknowns; and third, consciously integrating this information into our world view and decision making” (29). Within the opening example, my peer needed a safe space to express her concerns. I just happened to be the person present when emotions presented themselves. As I listened to the discourses at work in that situation, I realized that the student felt out of place in the university. As the deadline was quickly approaching and the institutional

discourse of expectation and performance weighed heavily over her, she likely felt inferior to the assignment she was tasked with accomplishing. In that moment, the assignment's requirements were bigger than her capabilities—a feeling most students at some point can relate to, even writing tutors. By viewing the student's narrative through my own student experience, rather than an institutional one, I was able to better identify with her. She returned for other visits to the WaLC that semester, so it seems rhetorically listening to the perspective of a student's experience rather than the assignment was beneficial.

### **Shared Discourse Experience**

In an analysis of tutor columns in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* over the last decade, discourse navigation and awareness seem notable topics for writing tutors to discuss. While the following tutors address similar notions of awareness that I describe in this chapter, I interpret them through a pedagogical awareness provided through rhetorical listening. In doing so, their accounts are better understood in relation to how they became aware to the needs of their fellow students. Prior to their work in writing centers, these students fostered a traditional understanding of tutoring as teaching. However, once they were exposed to writing center pedagogy, they developed a deep awareness of the conflicts students face when the institution does not serve their needs.

Kristin Boyd and Ann Haibeck explore their experience navigating pedagogical approaches in their column "We Have a Secret: Balancing Directiveness and Nondirectiveness During Peer Tutoring." Boyd and Haibeck approach the power dilemma found in writing center pedagogy in a praxis-oriented format. They describe the conflict tutors face between believing in a student's ability to generate the necessary

information and answering questions a student clearly wants a tutor to answer. They pose the question of how to handle tutoring scenarios that demand a tutor move between the two sides: letting the student's knowledge guide the session or asking the student more direct, guided questions. In the example the authors provide, the tutor, Ann, moves between asking open questions to describing a few specific examples that relate with the student's essay. Boyd and Haibeck find that Ann's use of the two styles shows her ability to navigate the power structure within a tutoring session (15). Beyond this recognition, however, Ann's conflict arises from the competing viewpoints found in tutoring pedagogy: either teach the necessary information or shift the conversation to letting the student struggle through generating information. Ann's willingness to take control by providing specific examples to help her tutee comes from understanding that the tutee expects her to possess knowledge due to her alignment with the institution. Ann, conscious of this system, uses her tutee's expectation to help the student start down a more successful road. When the tutee begins to take more control of the session, Ann backs off and relinquishes the authority she used to help the student generate ideas (15). The keen sense of awareness Boyd and Haibeck describe in their example shows the constant ebb and flow tutors must negotiate on a daily basis. The conflict created in writing center pedagogy helps Ann understand the conflict her tutee feels with the assignment. Therefore, Ann's awareness allows her to better connect with her tutee and provides a more student-focused approach than one committed to a pedagogy that may not be beneficial.

In her 2007 column, "Everything I Need to Know About Life I Learned at the Writing Center," Soma Kedia, whose words help open this chapter, discusses her move

away from the traditional understanding of tutoring. Kedia offers that she thought tutoring, prior to her time working in a writing center, focused on grammatical issues: “*Sure* some people might need a course to teach them about writing and tutoring, but not me.../ ‘edited’ all of the English papers that were ever written in my dorm—I even *loved* red pens and grammar” (13, emphasis in the original). Kedia’s original understanding of tutoring as editing closely aligns with the current-traditional practice in which tutors are expected to teach knowledge concerning grammatical issues— corrections are made without questions being asked. However, when she enrolled in a writing center course, Kedia became aware of the tenants of peer tutoring: hierarchy of concerns, active listening, and non-directive questioning (13). Each of these pedagogical concerns focuses on empowering students—a counter to the corrective editing practices Kedia discusses. Kedia’s experience awakened her to tutoring pedagogy’s hierarchal dynamics: “it was not until I began tutoring that I actually began to conceptualize means for old, accepted institutions to be made less hierarchical, less merit-based, more cooperative, and more inclusive” (14). As I argued earlier, tutor training, with its placement between two pedagogical systems, makes students aware of the hierarchy in place. While I cannot speculate on the exact texts and methods used in Kedia’s training, from her words it seems reasonable to assert that tutoring pedagogy raised Kedia’s social awareness. She became aware of how her own pedagogical practices either help the tutees with whom she works or reaffirm possibly harmful institutional expectations. Kedia’s experience generates from her own understanding of what success looks like in an academic setting, an idea Elizabeth McKibben deals with specifically.

McKibben's column "Confronting Notions of Institutional Success" addresses the institutional focus on grades and how the accepted discourse of achievement based on grades affects students. McKibben opens her column by pointing out that tutors are likely "students with good grades looking for an avenue to share our knowledge and skill with others" (14). McKibben highlights that her ability to achieve what the university sets forth as success, an "A" grade, meant she became accustomed to that pedagogical expectation (14). More importantly, however, McKibben analyzes how the broader institutional discourse of success creates conflict with her understanding of writing center pedagogy. When McKibben struggles to help her tutees achieve grade-based success, she reminds herself of the ideas presented in writing center pedagogy: "I feel like a failure. It is irrational, an emotion stemming from my projection [the institution's projection] of success onto another person that is nonetheless assuaged by my by understanding of the Writing Center's pedagogy" (14). In this moment, McKibben places herself between three discourse communities: her own, the institution, and her fellow students. McKibben's awareness creates a struggle for her own identity in relation to writing center work: "While I believe in the pedagogical values of our Writing Center and adopt them in a position of power, my student-self values institutional success more" (15). McKibben's struggle places her in a discourse space that benefits her but not the students she tutors. Her understanding, however, allows her to navigate each space successfully: "As tutors with multiple identities, we have the responsibility to re-evaluate the 'transparent discourse' of academia to better evaluate our students as writers" (15). McKibben acknowledges that the academic system in which she found success does not necessarily benefit all students. In this recognition, McKibben

develops a pedagogical perspective focused on student need rather than institutional success.

In one final vignette, I want to draw out what a session might look like when a tutor does not follow McKibben's self-awareness. In my first semester tutoring, I had a student cry after I tutored from an institutional perspective rather than a personal one. The student brought her essay into the WaLC the evening before the deadline. She fidgeted throughout the session, and I, new to tutoring, conducted the session as if the deadline was a week away. At the time, I thought my responsibility was to provide as much information to my fellow student as possible. I asked her to describe any issues with the essay that she wanted to address before she read the essay aloud. The issues centered on whether or not I thought the essay "sounded good" and "met the instructor's prompt." In this moment, she had relinquished her own power and given control of the essay over to my judgment, seeking my institutional identity to *provide* the answer. After she finished reading the essay, her voice shaky the entire time, instead of asking her thoughts, I immediately started describing moments in the essay I thought needed revision. When I mentioned the essay needed structural changes, she asked, "How do I do that?" I responded, "It's going to take a fairly drastic revision." When I looked up from her essay, I could see tears starting to swell in her eyes. I had focused on the assignment rather than the person, sharing the information she did not need. I failed to recognize the various aspects at work in the session. This student, much like the student who opens this essay, felt up against an assignment that seemed beyond her abilities. My admission that I thought the essay needed drastic revisions only confirmed what the student was already thinking about her work—the assignment and her abilities

needed revision. In reality the essay was fairly well written; I thought a different focus could help strengthen what was already on the page, which required rethinking and rewriting the essay. When I noticed her tears, I quickly shifted the session into a more “we can do it” approach. However, if I had listened to the viewpoints impacting the student, I might have been able to reassure the student of her ability as a writer and her ability to successfully complete her assignment.

Writing center directors and scholars need to keep constant vigil on the ways broader institutional concerns continually impact tutors. When tutors feel challenged by various pedagogical discourses, they are likely to better relate to the students they work with on a daily basis. This sense of awareness makes tutors the likely agents to carry out the concerns of the discipline in meeting each student’s needs, and it makes them more likely to practice rhetorical listening with their fellow students. When directors tap into this awareness, they possess the possibility to truly make all tutors aware of the issues that are present in tutoring sessions. When this takes place, the needs of the students walking through writing center doors are more fully met, hopefully ensuring that writing centers provide the space students need in order to find their own place within the academic community. Rather than institutional concerns working through tutors to define students, tutoring from an aware perspective allows students, tutors and tutees alike, to define themselves.



### CHAPTER THREE – RHETORICAL LISTENING IN PRAXIS: ACTING OUT RHETORICAL LISTENING IN TUTORING SESSIONS

*We all negotiate multiple identities, moving between public and private selves, living in a present shadowed by the past, encountering periods in which time and circumstance converge to realign or restructure our images of who we are.*

—Anne Dipardo

*In such moments of listening [rhetorically listening] to each other, our institutions, to our cultures, and to ourselves, we may see how our identities are always already grounded in our identifications, disidentifications, and nonidentifications with others.*

—Krista Ratcliffe

As the previous two chapters show, listening rhetorically requires a developed sense of awareness on behalf of the listener. The listener must consciously try to understand and navigate the many narratives displayed in any given scenario. For the tutor, this means she understands what she represents. Not only as a member of the university, but also as a student. She must account for how her race, economic status, and gender<sup>5</sup> shape an individual experience within the university. Of course, each of the terms will present itself differently in any scenario. I, as a White, male, upper-working-class student, may represent the ultimate sense of privilege through my race and gender to some observers. For myself, I hope I represent a much more understanding presence—one that does not use my perceived gender or race to my advantage. But in order to be an understanding person, I must recognize that my privileges are not universal, and my experiences are limited to myself.

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<sup>5</sup> I use the word *gender* to represent how an individual represents their biological sex. As such, an individual experience must be accounted for when thinking through personal representations.

To practice rhetorical listening, a person must set herself beside a scenario and examine it through a perspective that acknowledges difference. In other words, rhetorical listening requires examination of another person's presented argument as well as the listener's relationship to the presented ideas. If I am in a discussion over marriage equality with a friend and he argues against legalizing same-sex marriage, it becomes my responsibility to try and understand the reasoning behind his voiced opinion. While I may take his opinion as an affront to my three gay uncles (and I do), he and I are better served by engaging in dialogue rather than a knee-jerk reaction on my side of the argument. If I let my feelings concerning my family dominate the conversation, then I engage in a conversation of emotion rather than true dialogue focused on understanding each another. At best, the conversation would end with both of us none-the-wiser, but at worst, I could easily lose a friend over a difference that does not directly impact our relationship. To try and prevent a negative outcome, I must be self aware of how I understand the topic of marriage equality through a familial and personal connection. My friend, on the other hand, does not have a similar relationship with the topic.

The ideas of self-reflection and awareness focus solely on the self and cannot forcibly involve another person. As Krista Ratcliffe points out: "[a] listener's desire cannot control how other readers, writers, speakers, or listeners will, in turn, receive the listener's desire, discourse, or actions" (34). As this quote highlights, listening rhetorically is an unseen action, which complicates understanding its practice. A listener's lack of ability to control whether or not another person listens develops from the idea that listening depends solely on personal awareness. While I may know that I

am attempting to better understand the argument offered by my friend, he may not realize my intent. Of course, if he and I are friends, then we hopefully have already developed a relationship that allows for engaged, thoughtful conversation, but dialogue through established relationships are not always how difficult issues are discussed, much less resolved. Sometimes, these discussions turn confrontational.

Before I entered into graduate school, I spent the previous seven years working at The Farm Golf Club (The Farm), a private club in Rocky Face, Georgia. As with many private golf clubs, The Farm was closed on Mondays and employees were allowed to play golf. My coworkers and I played on Monday evenings and then went to eat at Zaxby's, a Georgia-based restaurant. In 2012, during President Obama's reelection campaign, we sat down at a table and began talking about the various issues shaping the election. During the conversation, a gentleman next to us joined in by informing my group: "Anyone supporting Obama was being influenced by Satan." I know, stereotypical Georgia, but since I was the only person from my group openly supporting President Obama, I engaged this man in a conversation over various issues that seemed to bother him the most. What I soon realized was that his background, particularly how he identified within a religious context, completely shaped his viewpoint. His opinions developed out of his conservative Christian perspective, one not uncommon in Northwest Georgia. No matter how I varied the conversation to address his conservative Christian logoi, explaining my own theological understandings and trying to find common ground to discuss conflicting ideas, my attempt to engage the conversation beyond the initial *hell* moment was limited to his perspective, and the conversation could not move in a positive direction. Like in my opening scenario, the

man and I discussed marriage equality. In this context, however, unlike when discussing various perspectives with my friend, this man and I could not find common ground in which to engage one another. Clearly, he and I did not have a developed relationship before we began the conversation. I'm sure I may have even made an unkind comment over the frustration that the conversation caused. Growing up as a liberal in conservative, rural North Georgia, I have a *special* relationship to words and gestures in conversations that begin from an overly righteous religious standpoint. However, I tried to connect to this man in anyway that I thought might help: Bible references, church references, and even the fact that we were from the same area and likely knew some of the same people. I listened to try and find a way the language this gentleman used could better help me understand his perspective. And while I cannot verify that the man was not listening or attempting to engage in thoughtful dialogue, I am fairly certain the gentleman's opening statement concerning Satan shows he listened to offer a rebuttal but never to hear my perspective.

What these two opening scenarios show are two vastly different ways rhetorical listening can be interpreted in situations. In the first scenario, my friend and I sought to understand one another through our own relationship. Our relationship established an understanding of one another in which we sought to achieve a positive outcome to our conversation. We understood that our opinions were shared with trust in one another to thoughtfully consider the opposing viewpoint. Without that relationship in place, we would likely not have been able to have a conversation that moved beyond the "I said, he said" conversation that I find usually develops when discussing sensitive topics. In the second scenario, the gentleman and I, both enjoying our meals, could not move

beyond the stalemate structure of “I said, he said.” Undoubtedly, we had common ground—we clearly had a connection to Biblical teachings and region of the country—but the common ground we had was lost in the animosity he and I likely showed towards one another. When I tried mentioning my own beliefs as a social justice geared United Methodist, he quickly noted that I was “no Christian” by his standards. Even though I tried to find a connection by engaging in a religious framework, I could only control how I sought to engage him. I had no control over his reaction.

In this chapter I explore similar scenarios in writing center work from a tutor’s perspective, paying particular attention to how my own identity influences my tutoring. Using Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening theory<sup>6</sup>, I demonstrate how my fellow students’ identities or nonidentities can be listened to and located through practicing rhetorical listening. In doing so, I hope to show what listening rhetorically looks like in a writing conference, making rhetorical listening a beneficial praxis for tutors. However, before these accounts can be navigated, I need to establish Ratcliffe’s framework from which this chapter unfolds.

### **Connecting Rhetorical Listening with a Tutoring Session**

In her text *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, Krista Ratcliffe calls for rhetorical listening to follow four moves:

1. Promoting an *understanding* of self and other
2. Proceeding within an *accountability* logic
3. Locating identifications across *commonalities* and *differences*

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<sup>6</sup> The text, *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, includes several examples of recognizing, locating, and practicing rhetorical listening. It is in the manner of these examples that I write my own account of engaging in rhetorical listening, adding writing centers as a location of praxis.

4. Analyzing *claims* as well as the *cultural logics* within which these claims function. (26, emphasis in original)

Ratcliffe claims: “these critical thinking skills may lay grounds for productive communication” (26). When my friend and I discussed marriage equality from a place of respect for one another with a goal of understanding each other’s perspective, we followed Ratcliffe’s first two “moves.” However, when the gentleman and I engaged in conversation across tables at dinner, we did not promote an understanding of each other, nor did we attempt to engage one another with the understanding that we offered opinions that deserved to be shared and critiqued. Our failure to engage in shared rhetorical listening limited the possibilities of our conversation. Even though I tried to find ways to connect with the man, he vehemently critiqued my opinions as nonsense. And while I can only take responsibility for my own actions in the conversation, had we sought to understand each other, we would have benefited from a more effective conversation.

Tutoring, one-to-one dialogue, exists based on effective communication. Within a tutoring session, tutor and tutee must engage one another from a perspective that each person has something worthwhile to offer the other person. Tutoring, in direct relation with Ratcliffe’s first move of “promoting an understanding,” relies on tutors trying to understand tutees. Within this expectation, it is incumbent upon tutors to seek to understand the perspective from which a tutee develops her writing. And while the tutee would benefit from seeking to understand the tutor’s self, what viewpoints and experiences influence the tutor, it is not an expectation that can be placed on the tutee. Therefore, tutors must try to account for their own understanding of the information, as

well as their tutees' understandings. Without a more detailed and broader listening pedagogy being implemented across the institutions writing centers serve, tutors are best suited to perform listening in hopes of a tutee's engagement but without attempting to dictate a tutee's own listening. As Ratcliffe's first move details, rhetorical listening's ethos of understanding mirrors the pedagogical ethos found in writing center scholarship. Denny furthers Ratcliffe's call for understanding self and others when he argues: "[in tutoring sessions] identity and the politics of negotiation and face are always present and require inventory and mapping" (28). With this sentiment, Denny recognizes that tutoring sessions are enmeshed in various identities—a term Ratcliffe takes great care to explain and whose theorizing allows for exploration in her third move: "Locating identifications across *commonalities* and *differences*" (26, emphasis in original).

Ratcliffe finds that current identity theories, particularly Kenneth Burke's often cited interpretation, are narrow in their application. She argues that Burke's idea of substance and consubstantiation—when substances, the basic structures of people and ideas, align—focuses only on commonalities and leaves differences in the background. As a result, differences are not explored and are left behind in order to focus on common ground so that persuasion takes place (32). Identification, for Ratcliffe, however, is not about persuasion. Ratcliffe offers a definition of identity that takes into account both places of commonality and places of difference "by theorizing identification as metonymic places of commonalities and differences. In such identifications, discourses (not substances) converge and diverge. Dialogue emerges as a dialectical conversation that questions the process of dialectic" (32). Here, the "metonymic places

of commonalities and differences” require exploration because how someone identifies only represents that person. A person’s identity does not allow that person to represent an entire group. Within Ratcliffe’s explanation, dialogue serves as a means by which to explore not only similarities in identity, but also an opportunity for listeners to understand the dissonance of discourses—how different discourses counter one another and the reasons why. Identification then represents only a basic understanding of the term. A person may identify as African-American, but rhetorical listening asks for that term be explored for what it means to that specific individual. For myself, I identify as White and male, but those terms are meaningless without careful examination of what they mean to my own experiences. How I define my maleness, social attributes associated to men, or my whiteness, the social attributes attributed to my skin color, may be different than the whiteness or maleness of my brother.

Ratcliffe goes on to offer that rhetorical listening “may foster such a dialogue...wherein awareness of the disidentifications [moment’s of difference]...make us attentive to power plays that are ideologically (un)fair and the resulting troubled identifications” (66). These moments of troubled identification, where people are locked in opposing viewpoints, have the possibility of resolution when at least one person takes on the role of rhetorical listener. When a person assumes the role of rhetorical listener, “troubled identifications may perhaps become more audible...and then perhaps more visible...and then perhaps more possible to negotiate” (66). Rhetorical listening then provides an opportunity for two people engaging in dialogue from different backgrounds to better understand one another’s opinions.



The writing center provides the necessary location for this dialogue to take place. When a tutor and tutee sit down together, they engage one another through not only their similarities but also their differences. As a tutor, when I sit down to work with a fellow student to discuss their assignment, I engage with more than the words on the page. I communicate with the experiences and moments that led up to that student being able to accomplish the assignment between us. When I make a suggestion about clarifying a thesis statement, I am commenting on how that student developed their ideas. But in a deeper way, with each comment I make concerning a disidentification, a moment of difference, between my understanding of the essay and the student's understanding, I am commenting on the experiences that developed her ideas. In a similar manner, when I sit down with a student, as the previous chapter highlights, I am a representative of an institution that in some way dictates a student's success or failure. As a tutor, I must rhetorically listen to how my institutional identity impacts the student across from me. Rhetorical listening's emphasis on acknowledging moments of similarity and difference explains Ratcliffe's third move of locating identities. In order for this acknowledgment to take place, however, rhetorical listening must develop from an "accountability logic," Ratcliffe's second move.

Accountability develops from a sense of community. Ratcliffe explains: "*Accountability* means that we are indeed all members of the same village, and if for no other reason than that...all people necessarily have a stake in each other's quality of life" (31, emphasis in original). Ratcliffe's explanation of accountability logic closely relates to the logic associated within a tutoring session. Writing centers are small communities within a larger campus, creating a space that allows Ratcliffe's

“accountability logic” to take place. In a more narrow understanding, the writing center represents a community in which each member, tutor and tutee, is responsible for engaging one another on the basis that each person shares responsibility for a beneficial outcome. Peer tutoring magnifies this point by directly aligning tutor and tutee within a discourse based on the similarities between the two individuals, student and student. By doing so, peer tutoring’s ethos connects with rhetorical listening’s ethos. Beneficial tutoring takes place when the tutor and tutee engage one another with the idea that both have something to offer to the conversation. Through this engagement, tutor and tutee have a shared responsibility for the outcome of a tutoring session. They become members of the village Ratcliffe describes. When people establish mutual responsibility, an analysis of viewpoints can take place.

The final move Ratcliffe asserts must happen in rhetorical listening is for statements to be analyzed within their social context. She explains rhetorical listening functions by “analyzing *claims* as well as the *cultural logics* within which these claims function” (26, emphasis in original). Within any given conversation, people present different perspectives. Rhetorical listening requires that those involved in a conversation attempt to understand different perspectives by trying to understand the cultural viewpoint from which they come. Rather than simply listening to a perspective to offer a rebuttal, analyzing a perspective asks the listener to deal with how a perspective represents commonalities or differences between the speaker and listener. In the confrontational example that helps open this chapter, the gentleman’s perspective came from a conservative, Christian viewpoint. And while his statements represent only his

understanding of that viewpoint, they provide a route to better converse with him if the conversation is to result in a positive, peaceful resolution.

It is through navigating perspectives that Nancy Maloney Grimm, in her text *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, addresses the issue writing centers face when tutors do not analyze the context beyond the page. Grimm's call for "authentic listening" discusses a similar notion as Ratcliffe. For Grimm, listening in tutoring scenarios "is often done under the pressure of time, usually with a desire to be helpful, and almost always with what is a notion of a normal academic essay" (67). Authentic listening, however, allows tutors to take into account the tutee's true meaning, moving the tutor into a space that requires her to take time with the ideas a student presents. This principle closely aligns with Ratcliffe when she suggests, "by focusing on claims and cultural logics, listeners may still disagree with each other's claims, but they may better appreciate that the other person is not simply wrong but rather functioning from within a different logic" (33). By following this practice, tutors are better suited to understand the writer's intent for a session rather than their own intent. Tutors allow tutees to shape a session. When analyzing the tutee's perspective, tutors work to understand tutees, and as a result, help make the tutees' writing goals come to fruition. When a tutor is able to understand what a tutee says rather than what she thinks the tutee means, a negotiated space develops that allows both tutor and tutee to engage in a beneficial session. The tutor, if practicing rhetorical listening, attempts to understand a text through the tutee's perspective and helps the tutee develop the text that she hopes to write. When this listening practice does not occur, the tutor simply helps develop an

essay that she thinks meets the expectations set forth within the cultural discourse that she operates. The tutor fails to meet the tutee's needs.

When tutors engage in tutoring through the moves Ratcliffe sets forth, they are able to help students in a way that recognizes a tutee's expectations rather than the tutor's expectations. Rhetorical listening allows tutors to acknowledge the cultures each student represents on a page. However, in order to recognize the various cultures present within a tutoring session, tutors must also recognize how their culture, the viewpoints impacting them, develops commonalities or differences with their tutees. When differences are heard, tutors become conscious of how the discourses they represent may impact the tutee's identity. For example, when a tutee writes an essay that does not fit the tutor's expectations, the tutor must place her expectations within the tutee's perspective and work to make sure the differing goals merge together for a beneficial tutoring session to take place. Rhetorical listening places tutors in a setting that requires that they practice self-reflection within the context of a tutoring scenario. In order to show what this reflection may look like, I want to address my own experience reflecting on my own culture, the discourses (narratives) that make me, and show how that reflection connects to my own tutoring practice, because as Ratcliffe highlights: "a logic of accountability suggests an ethical imperative that, regardless of who is responsible for a current situation, asks us to recognize our privileges and nonprivileges and then act accordingly" (32). In the next section, I account for my own privileges and nonprivileges through an autoethnography. I chose this genre because it represents not only an opportunity for my own reflection but also an opportunity for the reader to listen for commonalities and dissonances in my presented discourse.

## Listening to Myself to Better Hear Others

Even though I have full control over the information that goes into this section, I am uncomfortable thinking about my heritage, what it means, and how it shapes my interactions with others. I am White, male, and heterosexual. While I understand that each of these categories is a social construction, when placed in the context of my familial heritage, these terms, especially my race, take on a different meaning. I'm a Southerner—born in South Georgia, raised in North Georgia. My father's ancestors settled in Murray County, Georgia just after Andrew Jackson forced the Native Americans to move during the Trail of Tears. My grandfather's great-grandfather served as a prison guard at Andersonville Prison (the name connection is coincidence) at Camp Sumter, a Confederate prisoner-of-war camp. A few year's later, one of his former slaves wrote a slave narrative detailing his time under my ancestor's control. While I have not read the text, my heritage directly connects to the issues of race that are often found in today's discourse. Even though I cannot control any of this information, I am keenly aware of how my heritage acts as a means for privilege due to the historical whiteness that dominates current thinking within American culture. Sharon Chubbuck, in her article "Whiteness Enacted, Whiteness Disrupted: The Complexity of Personal Congruence," defines whiteness as "institutional powers and privileges that benefit White Americans" (303). Whiteness represents the fact that White people very rarely identify racially and must face what their race represents in culture. Historian David Roediger explains whiteness in another way: "[whiteness] describes not a culture but precisely the absence of culture" (113, qtd. in Ratcliffe). Between these definitions, I understand my whiteness to represent the fact that I have hardly ever had to deal with

what my culture represents or what my background represents since other backgrounds and cultures are set apart in regard to my own race. I've never had to think that the color of my skin may be a reason of concern when police officers pull me over or I walk into a store. Writing about my racial identity presents a difficult task because I have never had to address what it means to be White in such a detailed manner, another sign of my whiteness. While my race shapes my narrative in one way, my socio-economic background shapes me differently.

I'm not sure if my childhood falls into working class or middle class. However, money was an issue my parents dealt with on a regular basis, which made my brother and I conscious of our place within a socio-economic system benefitting those with more money than we had. My mother spent the first years of my life at home with my brother and me, while my father worked two jobs to make ends meet. When I, the younger of the siblings, started kindergarten, my mother took a job as a teacher's aid. After transitioning to one job, my father has worked for United Parcel Service for thirty years. I've seen the manual labor he performs each day slowly wear his body down. Their work, particularly my father's job, represents a means to an end. Work is a way to pay bills for my parents, as it is for nearly everyone, but I get the sense that work is not necessarily something they enjoy. Their work experience does not coincide with the fulfillment I receive from my academic work. This difference, however, has made me question continuously whether or not the reading, writing, and researching I do as a graduate student counts as work within the framework in which I was raised.

My parents preferred I pursue a career that seemingly promised above-average wages and very little manual labor. My father often discussed how I should attend law

school. Instead, however, I am on the path of an academic or educator, pursuing my interest in learning rather than monetary gain. While I know that my parents are proud of my work, moving from a blue-collar background to the white-collar offices of academia has left me feeling like an outsider. While I am writing from a position of privilege to engage in ideas that I find interesting, I am writing from a sense of marginality created to develop a separation between myself and the card carrying members of the academy. I teach and write in the academy but am still a student. My identity blurs within an academic context.

Many students understand my feeling of dislocation with the university. While I feel dislocated at the graduate level, as I work to obtain the credentials my professors already have, most of the students I encountered while tutoring had an undergraduate experience of dislocation. As they moved from home to academia, they likely became aware of how the two cultures often clash. My sense of insecurity within the academy provides a framework in which I am better able to try and connect with students in tutoring sessions. It develops into one commonality from which to operate. However, I must keep in mind that while I find one commonality, I must also explore the differences I have with other students.

Once I take time to examine the discourses that shape my understanding of issues and ideas, I quickly learn that my experiences are not universal. Therefore, when I tutor, I must be open to the ideas and discourses that shape the students who I am lucky to meet. In the spring of 2015, I had the chance to tutor a young man from Saudi Arabia whose text focused on his personal experience growing up in the Middle East and benefiting from traditional Islamic medicine. It was clear from the start of the

session that I would have to approach the session differently because his background and influences were vastly different from my own growing up in a small, United Methodist church in rural North Georgia. I knew nothing about traditional Islamic medicine before the tutoring session began, which worked in my favor. My lack of knowledge forced me to listen to the specific understanding of the culture that my fellow student discussed on the page. I listened with the intent to understand.

His narrative concerned how his father took him, as a child, to a traditional medical practitioner after other doctors could not cure his cold. He seemed uneasy writing about his childhood experience. And after thinking through the situation, I can understand why. In this moment, I represented the institution, the whiteness that shaped the conversation that he was trying to enter. Beyond the walls of the writing center, my country was seemingly at war with his faith, at least if someone listens to the most boisterous politicians. In 2001, President Bush described the war on terrorism in a religious context: “this crusade...this war on terror” (qtd. in Carroll). And while how Bush used the term “crusade” likely needs closer examination, the religious context cannot be overlooked. Even more so, to a second-language student, English represents a new and questionable way to write that separates him from his own culture. Due to this session’s complexity and my lack of knowledge on the topic, I felt that it was my responsibility not to shape the essay into the normalized academic essay, but rather I found it my responsibility to help the student find confidence and comfort with the ideas he discussed. At the same time, however, I felt pulled to help form the essay to meet the instructor’s presumed expectations. But if I had attempted to insert myself into the student’s thinking, then I would have Americanized the text.



As the student went into detail about the medical practice he experienced, I had no frame of reference by which to compare it. The doctor described in the essay placed a heated nail on the student's temple to cure his cold. While this medical practice seemed unusual to me through my association with American medicine, I knew the student might have felt even more uncomfortable discussing his cultural medical practices with someone completely foreign to them. As the student continued, he slowly read through this section, which to me signified newness with Standard English or discomfort describing a culture seemingly not honored in an American context. By listening to the ideas beyond the reading of the text, I was better able to *hear* the student.

The session resulted in my asking him to include more details and to go deeper into his narrative. I knew that several aspects of his writing did not match American academic expectations, but he was writing within cultural logic much different from mine. I understood that his Arabic understanding of language worked differently from Standard English, and by working within that difference, I hopefully allowed my fellow student to develop the essay he desired.

I had to listen to the context beyond the page rather than construct the standardized context of the essay for this student. I could hear his uneasiness with each sentence read aloud, the pauses around the ideas that he tried to convey with his writing. If as a tutor I had tried to engage with my fellow student from a perspective that disregarded his attempt to describe his culture, then I would have been placing my lack of knowledge concerning Islamic medicine into his essay by trying to shape it into an American interpretation. By allowing this student to merge his cultural identity into the

essay genre without my dictating or urging various connections from my identifications, the student, hopefully, felt more comfortable expressing himself on the page.

The ideas expressed during my encounter with my fellow student are situated within Ratcliffe's framework. From the moment the essay's subject was discussed, I knew I needed to try and understand the environment from which the student wrote. By recognizing that the student's viewpoint differed from mine, I knew that my engagement with the ideas needed to honor his beliefs rather than trying to negate them for the sake of making a more clearly written essay. By doing this, I realized he and I were both accountable for his success and comfort with writing. I used the session as a chance to learn about his experiences, and I let his own words guide the session. Rather than using my position as tutor to attempt to make his writing fit the discourses in which I identify, I honored the differences and let the session develop from that place. The disidentifications shaped the session to form a more balanced interaction from a power perspective.

In her article "Whispers of Coming and Going": Lessons from Fannie," Anne Dipardo offers a similar account of negotiating cultural difference, finding that tutors should develop an in-depth understanding of listening to better engage students. Dipardo describes the experience of Fannie, a Navajo student and nonnative English speaker, working with a peer tutor, Morgan, an African-American student. Dipardo focuses on the need for Morgan to develop a keener ability to listen to Fannie's needs. Fannie developed a relationship with Morgan as they worked together in order write an essay concerning "values" for one of Fannie's courses (135). Over the course of various sessions, it became clear that Morgan struggled as the tutor to let Fannie develop her

own ideas: “While Morgan emphasized that she ‘didn’t wanna write the paper for her,’ she allowed that ‘it’s difficult—it’s really hard to want to take the bull by the horns and say, ‘don’t you see it this way?’” (137). Fannie’s essay focused on her interpretation of how America’s natural landscape had shifted from once being beautiful to no longer exhibiting beauty. As she attempted to explain her ideas to Morgan, Morgan tried to frame them within the discourse of broader cultural understandings. Morgan understood Fannie’s discussion of the environment to represent that Fannie was an environmentalist and attempted to help Fannie interpret her beliefs through an environmentalist framework. Morgan’s tactic was an attempt to help her understand Fannie’s ideas, but in doing so, Morgan did not hear the cultural discourse at play in Fannie’s writing.

As Dipardo points out, Fannie’s Navajo identity shaped her viewpoints on the environment: “the Navajo’s connection to the land is legendary—a spiritual nexus, many would maintain, that goes far beyond mainstream notions of what it means to be concerned about the environment” (137). Not hearing Fannie’s cultural background created a conflict between the tutor and tutee. Dipardo argues:

what Morgan most needed was advice to *listen more*—for the clues like Fannie would provide, for those moments when she might best shed her teacherly persona and become once again a learner. More specific than instructional strategies, Morgan needed the conceptual grounding that would allow her to understand that authentically collaborative learning is predicated upon fine grain insight into individual students. (140, emphasis in original).

If Morgan had been able to hear the narratives that developed in Fannie's Navajo heritage, she would have been better suited to help Fannie navigate the language and ideas she wanted to employ in her writing. But Morgan also needed to understand her own discourse, the one that identified someone with concerns for nature as an environmentalist, so that she could be conscious of how her own interpretation of ideas influenced her interaction with tutees.

It's important to note that rhetorical listening does not require that a tutor fully understand a tutee; it simply asks that a tutor try and understand how their own influences interact with the influences shaping tutees. I've tried to place my own experiences and cultural connections into this chapter in order to help show how various discourses interact, from friendly dinners to tutoring sessions. True listening comes in the moments when different viewpoints do not connect. Ratcliffe uses the term "non-identification" to label these moments, and argues that these moments "where concepts of the negative and of identification are associated but not overlapping...provide a place of pause, a place of reflection, a place that invites people to admit that gaps exist" (73). When tutors are able to make this realization, they are able to engage their fellow students in a conversation that pays homage to difference. Tutors are able to recognize a discourse that develops from understanding that different viewpoints are constantly at play within tutoring sessions.

Of course, tutors cannot do this alone. They need administrators willing to engage tutors with the difficult ideas that each person represents. Tutors need encouragement and support as they try to tackle the many ways academia fails to meet students where they are. Having tutors engage with their own autoethnographies may

be a place to start. However, it's important to keep in mind that all tutors represent separate discourses, just as the students they tutor. The autoethnographies must be engaged with by other tutors to help show differing discourses at play. While its not always enjoyable thinking through what one's self may represent, when different experiences are accounted for, tutors are better able to help students explore their own ideas and help them connect to their own thoughts within an institution that does not always pay homage to difference.

## CONCLUSION

Studying how rhetorical listening interplays with writing center work provides a personal, in-depth understanding of the experiences tutors encounter on a daily basis. Further study of listening in writing centers may provide a new pedagogical undertaking for writing center administrators to develop pedagogy that acknowledges the various narratives at play in tutoring sessions. Even more so, rhetorical listening as writing center praxis creates a scenario in which tutees are afforded a session that seeks to recognize their experiences. Tutors then work within tutees' narratives, rather than trying to fit them into a standardized academic context. As a result, students who often feel dislocated and marginalized by academia will hopefully feel welcome to explore their own identities and make academia fit into their identities rather than them trying to fit into academia. These students are then given power to control their own experiences.

Through exploring my own understanding and interaction with rhetorical listening, I have hopefully shown how rhetorical listening makes tutors far more aware of how their actions can impact a session. Tutoring, after all, should focus on recognizing fellow students for who they are and what got them to college. The fact that anyone has entered into higher education is a success in and of itself. Tutors should help foster that success by embracing the cultural narratives each tutor brings to a session. When tutors are aware that their success within an academic curriculum does not represent a universal experience but a personal one, they hopefully understand how individualistic each session then becomes.

As I engaged my own understanding and practice of rhetorical listening throughout the writing of this thesis, I began to understand the complexity rhetorical listening presents. It takes practice, and it's messy. As my own account shows, if I had practiced a more developed sense of rhetorical listening, I would have been a much more useful tutor. The sense of openness that Ratcliffe discusses requires that tutors be open to engage with the text and emotions that fellow students bring into tutoring sessions. If I had practiced openness in the second chapter's examples, I would have been much more prepared to help alleviate the stress my fellow students went through. Tutors must be willing to go into the uncomfortable aspects of the student experience in order for rhetorical listening to take place. They must be willing to address how their own experience may have marginalized another student's position within the university.

As a result, tutors will hopefully take their found awareness with them beyond writing center walls. They will look to understand different experiences and viewpoints from a perspective of learning rather than confrontation. Rhetorical listening then transforms how tutors see themselves and the world in which they live. Not as a place of us versus them scenarios, but rather a place in which each experience holds validity and deserves to be heard.

Tutors are not alone in this call. Writing center professionals must also be willing to explore how their own work and experiences either help or hurt the tutoring process. Professionals must be aware of how their scholarship impacts the tutors who do not necessarily have a say in their tutoring practice. They must practice rhetorical listening in order to reflect on the complexities behind their work. When writing center administrators and tutors listen, they become aware of each student's complex

experience. In doing so, writing centers more fully return power to students. When a student's experience is welcomed into the conversation, writing centers serve as sites of liberation, allowing students to no longer feel marginalized by the academic system that in some way marginalizes us all.



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