Writing, is it an Individual Act?: Approaches to Effective Writing Center Pedagogy

*“Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.”* —Paulo Freire

This contents of this paper are informed not only by scholarship written about the writing center pedagogy, but also from personal experience as a writing tutor.

Intellectual property rights and plagiarism stand relatively on bordering lines. This association has emphasized the validity of writing centers that promote students’ learning and encourage students’ full ownership of their work. Robert H. Moore’s (Murphy and Law, 1995, 1) views on the writing center as “a site for diagnosing and removing language deficiencies” have developed and redefined the purpose and effectiveness of writing centers. For one, many centers attend to “prescriptive” rules of grammar and set aside other methods of teaching, aside from simple grammar drills aimed to shore up sentence-level skills. With writing seen as a product rather than a progressing textual entity, the writing is viewed as a disposable piece that can be replaced. However, writing centers also provide a more pedagogical focus and engage students in conversations about their writing, where the tutor poses questions relevant to the assignment and the tutee answers them in order to collaborate on a text. I intend to retheorize writing center work so as to investigate how the relationships between tutor-tutee, tutor-instructor, tutee-their work, instructor-student work, operate. In an attempt to do so, I will look into scholarship that looks at writing center pedagogy and use my experience as a tutor to interrogate factors influencing such operations. This will help guide the main purpose of this paper, which is to suggest that the ideology of individualism, that is the assumption that the interdependence occurring between tutor-writer-and work is made into an individual process that excludes those students who are “true beginners.”

My concentration will be on assessing a tutoring center’s pedagogy that stresses active engagement with the learners who are second language speakers of English, low income, first generation and underrepresented in higher education. Writing and teaching through a Chicano/a Studies lens may be a contributing factor that bridges the student to the work. In retrospect, as Joy Reid suggests “teachers [as well as other educators] should accept their responsibility as cultural informants and as facilitators for creating the social discourse community in the ESL classroom” (275). Though the space has changed tutors in this manner, though still in training, serve as cultural informants to empower and facilitate students in both their critical thinking and writing abilities. Tutors thus provide a linguistic gateway bridging language and culture to the writing process.

Victor Villanueva is important to this study because he goes beyond examining the techniques used in the writing lab; he also challenges the writing center community to look at the rhetoric and the language used and reused. By analyzing the social, historical, and political implications of terminology including ethnicity, Villanueva highlights the exclusionary facets that are embedded within language, a vehicle that allows for assumptions to create, each which are also recycled. He cites Glazer and Moynihan in their analysis of such terms by claiming that “Ethnic groups…even after distinctive language, customs and culture are lost…are continually recreated by new experiences in America. The mere existence of a name itself is perhaps sufficient to form group character in new situations, for the name associates an individual, who actually can be anything, with a certain past, country, or race” (27). Such socially constructed categorizations always allude to its subjectivity. In this case, it either alludes to the assimilation into a new culture, whether voluntary or involuntary, which respectively influences the identity formation of those involved. In his exegesis of the ‘new racism’, he embeds racism within a set of other categories—language, religion, culture, etc. so as to approach race beyond the limiting definition that it only encompasses the color of an individual’s skin and how that color differs from the color of other groups of people. The question that then follows this analysis interrogates the interconnections between writing labs and racism, as a form of exclusion that intersects race with class and socio-economic status.

Writing Center Mottos Faced and Defaced

Though there are set guidelines that emphasize ways tutors should approach a tutoring session, there are strict rules by which tutors are to formulate their appointment, so as not to cross strict barriers. As Nancy Grimm provides in her article, “Retheorizing Writing Center Work to Transform a System of Advantaged Based on Racism,” tutors tutor with the stigma that “A good tutor makes the student do all the work.”The focus of such assertion is grounded on individualism, a “virtue” venerated by Western culture. The tutor is warned that writing centers do not do students’ work for them and that editing is needless to say, completely shunned from any conversation having to do with writing and the writing process. Adding to this is the idea that students are to learn on their own and that they should be able to formulate their own set of original ideas. Making such claim, however, is problematic. As Villanueva points out, “The bootstraps break before the boots are on, that too many have no boots.” This is to place emphasis on the skills by which students walk into the writing center with in the first place.

To say that all students are on the same level follows the utopian belief wherein all students learn in the same way and which no outer factor (including familial and environmental) influence their ability to read, write, and overall, excel academically. Given then that we do not live in such a society, however, then suggests that there is a separation between what Gee further terms “false beginners,” those students who need only a reminder “to understand the tasks at hand [and]… ‘true beginners,’…who are not already privileged, who need to use all the available resources to find out what’s expected of them,” (85) and who are often labeled as dependent. Dependency is in this manner is seen negatively. To reference back to Villanueva’s analogy, the bootstraps are non-existent if the boots are not there in the first place and the reliance of the existence of these boots becomes dependent on a third party. The intervention from this third party often becomes too difficult to attain, especially if these boots are not distributed evenly.

In this same chain of association, while dependence is shunned, independence is venerated. This speaks on behalf of the belief that the aim of a writing center session is to produce independent writers who could edit their own work and automatically apply the strategies learned. Before even zooming into what occurs during a tutoring session, it is also important to look at the dualistic intentions of the dependent/independent framework. Moizas Ozias and Beth Godbee, for example, argue that the “emphasis on individualized instruction can leave us mired in feelings that systematic change lies beyond our power as writers, instructors, researchers and administrators” (150). This calls for needed collected action and leadership. This means accepting that writing is more than an individual process, despite systematic ideologies framed from this thought. It is a process that requires more than a single pair of eyes and a single brain working in collaboration. After all, if the ultimate goal was to foster independence, “we would more likely be concerned with writers who avoid writing centers rather than about students who regularly seek the dialogue that writing centers provide” (Grimm 85). This fear of being too dependent on another person to create “good quality” work then becomes the issue by which students might resent going to writing centers. The question then is why independent thinking rather than dialogic thinking must be seen as the ‘ultimate’ end goal of the tutorial?

The key tem in such question is the term, “dialogic” as it pays particular focus to the approach by which writing centers are to be conducted. What goes on in writing centers does not only affect the student in their visit to the writing center, but also limits the tutor attempting to provide aid in the writing process. As Grimm further provides, this limitation also discourages tutors from offering useful information “even ideas, to a writer who is working to bridge the literacy he or she brings from home with the literature expected in the academia” (84). Often, the student knows what they are trying to say and cannot put it down on paper, or other times this works the opposite way. In suggesting that the appointment should only focus on prescriptive drills of grammar instead of the content (because of fear that the student will be told what to write and how to write) sets limitations on both parties.

Authority, Product vs. Process, and Racism in Student Writing

The question then becomes, is the aim of the tutoring appointment to make better writers or better writing? That is to say, are we more concerned with the student’s development as a writer or with the reputation of an institution to pride itself with better writers? These questions can be explored from a capitalistic approach, one which changes the “identity of a writer by making them ‘better’” (Grimm). This call for an improvement to the individual’s writing abilities places emphasis on authority, the differences between product and process, and of most concern, racism. To start, we have to look at the authority provided by all members concerned with the development of the written piece. The student writes, the tutor tutors the writing, and the instructor assigns a grade for the overall and final piece. In response to the connection of these roles, many writing centers embraced a “pedagogy of noninterventionism that precludes both the appropriation of student texts and any challenges to teachers’ authority occasioned by questioning their judgment of a writer’s work.” This speaks to a form of authenticity that is prioritized and which looks at the piece the object produced from the interaction between all parties. The relationship even within such parties may change. For instance, as Casey Jones quotes, “tutors do not follow a given model with any two students because no two students can claim exactly the same environment” (8). The focus is thus on the individual rather than on the “problematic systematic expectation.” Process is then can arguably be prioritized over the product.

If process is prioritized then, we cannot dismiss the direct connections the work has with language. As Bakhtin provides in his piece “From Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,” “Everything ideological possesses meaning/; it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself” (1211). Words are made to represent a specific sign carrying a given purpose. It does not become a sign until this characteristic is made and followed through. In other words, once the words are developed, they take on multiple roles. Attached to language is thus power. This is especially so “since writing centers are situated within institutions which are themselves implicated in the power structures that wittingly or unwillingly foster racism, they cannot completely escape resembling and reproducing much of what students of color experience outside our spaces” (Geller et. al. qtd in Ozias and Godbee). This calls into question the focus on local and institutional culture within different settings and environments. Following this focus on culture then brings into light an institutional attempt to standardize language. As Greenfield provides,“Most people in the United States generally believe that ‘Standard English’ is the most proper, sophisticated, and clear way to speak English. We may recognize the prevalence of that kind of assumptions as it is expressed on our informal conversations with family and friends, and likely, as it creeps into our own thoughts now and again as a result of our social conditioning” (Greenfield 35). This form of social conditioning thus influences the way we approach academic persistence and resilience, a form of thought that is very often interrogated by the same institution that tells us the way we should write and even think.

It is with all these concepts in mind that I would like to end with the words of Ozias and Godbee when they argue that activism in the classroom “includes the pedagogical work in one-with-one conferences: enacting reciprocal learning, connecting writers with campus resources, building relationships, and discussing arguments and ideologies in texts” (Ozias 154). Thus, organizing does not only mean being at the head of protests it is also involves instructing in a way that allows for agency and not an emphasis on an individual form of learning. It should not be a passive process.