Students Work: A Discourse Analysis of Writing Center Mission Statements

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Writing centers are sites of one-to-one dialogue about writing. They exist on many colleges and universities, and, increasingly, in high schools. Though every center operates differently, they are typically not tied to curriculum or classroom. Some centers hire professional tutors, but most university writing centers employ undergraduate peer tutors. These practices situate the writing center as something of an alternative site within the institution, operating in contrast to traditional academic hierarchies and practices. This contrastive stance has historically attracted and created a "subversive" edge to writing center pedagogy.

Though once marginalized on college campuses, many writing centers are now enjoying a wide range of institutional support. As they move from the margins of the university to the center, it is important to remain mindful that with such prominence comes both responsibility and risk. The impetus for my current research project stems from the anxiety I feel watching centers aligning themselves more and more with universities whose missions have become increasingly "corporatized." I worry this alignment is caused by, and promotes, a blunting of our otherwise sharp critical and self-reflexive thinking.

Although the apparently self-contradictory position of "peer tutor" has been teased out in writing center scholarship (Hemmeter 1990, Runciman 1990, Trimbur 1987), little attention has been paid to the tension between the identities of "student" and "worker." As student workers constitute the central creative force of labour in most writing centers, I worry about the effects of not fully accounting for this fact in our everyday self-definitions.

Within our discourse, we have the ability to highlight or conceal the academic labour done by student workers. Supported by a grant from the International Writing Center Association (IWCA), my current project investigates how writing centers represent student labour rhetorically in their institutional and self-definitional literature.

Methodology

For my research project, I am performing a rhetorical analysis of a sampling of writing center mission statements. Such statements, according to writing center scholar Frankie Condon, are "more than window dressing" (2007:23). In her essay "Beyond the Known: Writing Centers and the Work of Anti-Racism," she writes that "mission statements name commitments to quality and service and as such serve as a means by which an institution or institutional site can hold itself accountable or be held accountable to the constituencies it seeks to serve" (2007:23).

My research engages a certain trend in rhetorical analysis called "critical discourse analysis." This practice has been championed by scholars such as Norman Fairclough (1989, 1993), Ruth Wodak (2001), and Teun A. van Dijk (1993). Rather than comprising a specific set of methods for linguistic analysis, the practice of critical discourse analysis involves exploring the linkages between micro-level linguistic choices and macro-level political trends (Fairclough 1993:135).

In analyzing writing center mission statements for their representations of undergraduate student labour, I follow three basic lines of questioning:

Does the mission statement explicitly represent the writing center as workplace for undergraduates

How does the mission statement represent the work being done in the center

How does the mission statement represent undergraduate peer writing tutors?

I am currently conducting a pilot study based on a small number of local writing centers in the northeast Ohio region. This pilot study allows me to hone my coding skills and refine my questions. As a novice researcher, having direct access to, and feedback from, experienced local writing center directors will prove invaluable in strengthening my own work. Once completed, I hope to move to a larger analysis of mission statements from across the United States. These statements will need to be collected with an eye towards diversity of geographic region and institutional type.

To provide an example in this research report, I have decided to look at one mission statement from my pilot study. Although unable to provide the depth or nuance of a larger sample, it should successfully illustrate my research questions. I have selected the mission statement from the writing center at the Kent State Stark Campus, where I worked as an undergraduate peer tutor from fall 2007 through spring 2009 (see below).

Results

Does the mission statement explicitly represent the writing center as workplace for undergraduates?
No. While it does reference "undergraduate tutors" and does describe some of the work they do, it does not explicitly describe the center as a place where undergraduates can find employment. Instead, the writing center is described entirely in its capacity as a service. This may seem like splitting hairs, but

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Mission Statement of the Kent-Stark Writing Center

The function of the Kent-Stark Writing Center is to provide a free collaborative space in which all members of the Kent State University-Stark community (students, faculty, staff, and alumni) can find support for their efforts to become more effective writers. Utilizing one-to-one conferences – available both in person and online – our staff of highly trained undergraduate tutors seeks to promote thoughtful engagement and ongoing reflection throughout the entire writing process. Our goal is not to supply directions, give answers, or "fix" papers for clients, but rather to empower them to discover their own solutions to the challenges in their writing. In addition to helping clients brainstorm, problem-solve, and revise, we also offer them a wide range of print and online resources (pamphlets, manuals, handbooks, etc.) in further support of their efforts. Beyond their one-to-one work with clients, Writing Center tutors also conduct writing workshops in classrooms, help foster the recognition and celebration of student academic writing by annually publishing The Writing Center Review, and help foster connections with the outside community by publishing Common Ground, an annual sold-for-donations volume of creative writing which benefits local charities. Tutors also pursue their own research interests in the tutoring of writing, research which they frequently present at local, regional, and national academic conferences, and occasionally publish in scholarly venues.

such elision makes invisible the process of hiring undergraduate tutors, making the path to student employment illegible. In this formulation, students are not posited as potential employees/tutors, but solely as consumers or clients.

How does the mission statement represent the work being done in the center?
The work described can be broken down into a few categories: general principles ("promote thoughtful engagement and ongoing reflection"), in-session tasks ("brainstorm, problem-solve, and revise"), and tasks that extend beyond the session ("conduct writing workshops in classrooms," "publishing The Writing Center Review," "pursue their own research interests"). It also describes a few tasks in the negative – that is, things they will NOT do ("supply directions, give answers, or 'fix' papers").

A larger sample size will allow me to compare the frequency of these (and possibly other) categories. These categories will allow a look at which kinds of work are privileged within this discourse. In this case, while we see a thorough and thick description of the "academic" work done by tutors, we do not glimpse the more "menial" tasks, such as scheduling appointments or maintaining a database. We also are denied knowledge of the work tutors complete to be trained and hired.

How does the mission statement represent undergraduate peer writing tutors?
To answer this question, I look to the work of John Swales and Priscilla Rogers (1995). In examining the affiliative nature of corporate mission statements, they quantified three factors: the total number of finite sentences, the number of employee-denoting subjects, and the different ways to which those employees could be referred (1995:231-233).

Following this example, the Kent State Stark mission statement has six finite sentences and five employee-denoting subjects. In the larger study, I will be able to compare these numbers with those of the other mission statements, not only in terms of total numbers, but in percentage of employee-denoting subjects. Doing so will provide a glimpse of the centrality of peer tutors to writing centers.

For their third category, Swales and Rogers list employee-denoting subjects in order of their affiliative nature. The most affiliative subject in their study is the use of the first-person-plural-pronoun "we" (1995:232). This appears once in the writing center mission statement ("we also offer them a wide range of print and online resources"). Another way to affiliate the tutors with the institution is the use of "Our" + NP. Again, this technique is used once in the statement ("Our goal is not to supply directions"). Finally, the least affiliative method of referring to employees is the use of specific sub-groups. This is used three times in the statement ("highly trained undergraduate tutors," "Writing Center tutors," and finally "Tutors").

As noted earlier, this sample set of one does not offer much room for nuance or discussion. It does, however, raise the issue of institutional affiliation. For instance, who does "our" refer to in the phrase "our staff of highly trained undergraduate tutors"? The writing center? The university? And to what degree do those highly trained tutors identify with that institution?

Conclusion
A renewed interest in the academic labour of student workers is not only necessary, but timely as well. As the current economic recession continues and universities see reductions in state funding, we will see a continuation of the trend towards using more contingent faculty – part timers, adjuncts, GAs, and even undergraduate peer tutors. This trend has been written about extensively in articles and books such as *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (Bousquet 2008) and *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University* (Bousquet and Parascondola 2004).

Daniel Mahala writes in his article "Writing Centers in the Managed University" that "writing centers make cash sense from the point of view of university presidents and administrators" because we are "consumer-friendly in a cost-efficient way, providing personalized one-to-one contact at a relatively low cost" (2007:7). This low cost is, of course, dependent largely on the work of skilled undergradu-

ate peer tutors who often work for minimum wage and without benefits. As writing centers move ahead in this time of economic austerity and "managed universities," a reconsideration of our roles, whether complicit, resistant, or subversive, is a necessary function of our scholarship.

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