

Resistance One-On-One: An Undergraduate Peer Tutor's Perspective

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Leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write. *Michel Foucault*

I am a conflicted person by nature. I don't often feel like I fit in, even in places where I really want to. I feel like a charlatan, an impostor, because I am always critiquing the very institutions I become a part of. This facet of my personality leads me to seek out other people and places that don't quite belong, spaces that represent the "borderland," people with whom I can share my sense of "in-betweeness." Maybe these impulses were what first led me to my campus Writing Center, where I have worked as a peer tutor for three years.¹

The Writing Center—not quite classroom, not quite student union—represents that borderland I am always on the lookout for. And that job title, "peer tutor," gives me one more conflict to embrace. Even my school itself is conflicted; the largest of Kent State University's eight regional campuses, Kent State Stark is a commuter campus located in Canton, Ohio, and serves about 4000 students. Our student body is heterogeneous; though not substantially diverse racially, we do have a significant population of "non-traditional" students (students over the age of twenty-five). As a twenty-four year old undergraduate, my position

as both "peer" and "tutor" is a confusing one. And yet, this conflicted identity is valuable to me. As a tutor, I try to help each student as best I can, and as a student, I empathize with their jammed schedules, incoherent professors, and vague assignments. By moving between the academic and student worlds, I find I can more easily recognize the borders and limitations of each. Being on-hand with students as they succeed, or sometimes fail, in their writing, I now have a more clear vision of when students are served by their institution and when they are not.

For instance, there is the widely contested concept of standardized testing. Incoming freshmen in the fall of 2008 were only eleven when the "No Child Left Behind Act" was passed². While the move to assessment-based education was already well in place before the Act, it codified such programs and outlined punishments for schools which do not perform. The students we now see entering college are products of this education, and younger students grew up in an educational environment geared towards standardization. Writing center director Joe Essid describes "this new demographic, coming to us at the same time as creeping corporatism" as being made up of students

1 Although the title denotes a single tutor, this paper could not have been completed—let alone started—without the help and support of my fellow tutors. Our work, and our rapport, is based on collaboration, and it is to that outlook which I accredit my perspective.

2 Passed in 2002, this Act institutionalized the use of standardized testing throughout the United States. It ties school funding to achievement, punishing schools that do not meet federally mandated scores by cutting funding. This focus on scores leads teachers to shift class time away from "extraneous" material, and focus narrowly on tested subject matter. The Act also allows military recruiters access to student records.

“both more conservative in their epistemology and with less allegiance than any in recent memory to the written word” (2005:3). The consequences of an education reduced to “teaching to the test” will reverberate throughout their intellectual lives. Although it has only been a few years since my own high school graduation, I feel have seen a general decline in the preparedness of incoming freshmen who visit our Writing Center, especially when it comes to critical thinking.

Unfortunately, the university setting is not necessarily the intellectual respite that it could be. Although corporate models do find their way into classrooms, it is often the administration that initiates such programs. I think of my own dean, who sometimes refers to herself as “Dean and CEO” (Kramer 2005), and the effects she has had on our campus by deepening our ties to local businesses and tightening our campus focus onto specific job-training degrees (Roche 2007), making the M.B.A. the first (and currently only) Master’s program available on my campus. Henry Giroux defines the university operating on a corporate model as one in which the “educational leadership is stripped of its ethical and political obligations and is redefined primarily as a matter of management, efficiency, and cost effectiveness” (Giroux 2001:3). Rather than holistic liberal arts approaches that facilitate a meaningful entrance into a democratic society, higher education is increasingly seen as a form of job training—where skill set assessments are the order of the day, rather than literacy or critical thinking.

It should be no surprise then when students come into the Writing Center and ask us to “fix” their papers for them. They’ve been told how important “time management” is and they are simply looking for an efficient way to correct their papers. It is likely their professors, increasingly over-worked part-timers or adjuncts, don’t have the time to address their concerns one-on-one (that’s cost effective administration at its best). But most distressing, these students, with their conservative epistemology, view writing as a product, an end result, a commodity. They come looking to have their papers “cleaned up,” as if the paper was a broken down car or pile of dirty laundry that the student can drop off and come back for

in an hour or two. For anyone familiar with writing center literature, these metaphors are not new. They have plagued us since the beginning.

I wish to stop here and backtrack for a moment. Knowing where we have been often helps us in knowing where we are going, and writing center literature has developed its own sort of creation myth. It goes something like this: between the 1950s and 1970s, “writing labs”—poorly funded, often housed in dusty basements or unused closets, and with a focus on grammar—were established to accommodate the increase in post-war enrolment and open enrolment policies. By the late 1970s, they were transformed into writing “centers,” and the focus was no longer solely on the mechanics of writing. As Daniel Mahala explains, “the shift from writing ‘lab’ to writing ‘center’ meant that our work was not fundamentally about ‘fixing’ this or that text, but about helping students develop a sense of agency as writers, helping them take charge of their own lives and educations” (Mahala 2007:4).

The writing “lab,” with its viewpoint that writing was simply a skill set that could be taught or given to students, represented a conservative view of writing (and education). By the mid-80s, this stance was replaced with a more liberal concept of writing. More than any other single document, Stephen North’s 1984 essay “The Idea of the Writing Center” came to dominate the way such centers have been viewed and defined. His essay outlines the importance of the writing center in a student’s writing “process” in contrast to the impact of a “lab” on the student’s writing “product.” He sharpened this focus to the axiom “Making better writers, not better writing.”

However, this liberal view, with its focus on the potential of the individual writer/student, is slowly being replaced by a more radical notion of education. As literacy educators have entered the ranks of writing center directors, the scope of their aim has broadened. Looking past the paper, past the individual student, writing center theory and practice is beginning to look at the social context in which this writing takes place. No longer viewed as neutral, writing centers are increasingly being positioned in ways that more clearly show the nature and form of institutional power. Here, writing centers can serve as points

of agitation, as places where students begin to understand the logic of the systems they are a part of.

This is where I fit in, or more precisely, where my conflicted self overlaps with the conflicting goals of my Writing Center. My director likes to remind me of Peter Dunne's admonition to journalists to both "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," and I see this as essentially my Writing Center's mission as well. When working with students who are comfortable in, and privileged by, standardized education, I seek to complicate their thinking, to help them expose and explore the underlying assumptions in their writing, thereby adding the element of risk into their education. Likewise, when working with students for whom leaner, more "efficient" classrooms are not an advantage but a threat, I will engage them in conversation about the structural hazards they face, such as racism or sexism. In either case, the "efficient" classroom teaches these students not to question, whether or not such silence is to their benefit. For students both comfortable and afflicted, the process of learning to question such authority is often enlightening and liberating.

For example, one evening I was sitting down in the Writing Center to work with a non-traditional African-American woman, when another woman, also older and African-American, came in. As it happened, they were from the same class and were having similar difficulties getting started on their assignment. Although they did not know each other well, they agreed to have a joint session, as I was the only tutor working that night. We began a conversation about the assignment, and about the class itself. They did all the talking. It was a difficult class, they explained, and the professor was hard to understand. Slowly, each found solace in the other's struggles, and with each confession from one came a knowing look of recognition from the other. Then, as their camaraderie seemed to be peaking, they turned to me, as if just remembering they were sitting with a skinny white boy. Not only that, but a writing tutor, someone who has probably done well in all his classes and has been given status and authority by the university. For a moment there was silence and their eyes seemed to ask if I was taking them seriously, or if I would just dismiss them the way other white people

probably had, as lazy blacks playing the race card. So I told them about the classes I've failed, the mistakes I made, and the frustrations that led me to give up at times. I told them that even though I couldn't know everything they'd gone through, I was sure racism and sexism had made life harder for them, and that unfortunately their experience in the university might not be all that different. Even though I felt like I was dropping bad news, that the university still holds some racism tightly, they both seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. I was listening to them. We were on the same page and with the air cleared, if only temporarily, we could move forward on the assignment.

This example demonstrates how writing centers can serve as safe spaces for students afflicted in the classroom. However, they can also serve as points of agitation to the system and, by their very nature, resist the corporate model. For instance, my own Writing Center seeks to disrupt student (and administrative) expectations. This year, we began offering "Food for Thought": free healthy snacks for students who drop in. A bowl of fresh fruit is kept near our door, visible to anyone passing by, and in clear contrast to both the highly commercial vending machines and the overpriced and deep-fried cafeteria food.

In addition to fresh fruit, we also distribute free condoms via our Writing Center. We received several hundred free, left over (and flavoured!) condoms from World AIDS Day events and agreed to keep them available to students year-round. They spark conversation from within the Writing Center and without. We are asked, what do condoms have to do with writing. Unfortunately very little, we sometimes quip. But the point is that safe sex is exceptionally important and, therefore, interdisciplinary. The tutors in my Writing Center also recognize that we see a lot of younger students and that such students are prone to make bad choices, both in their writing and in their sex lives, and so we want to extend whatever help we can. We do not feel that safe sex, or the Writing Center, should be boxed in by narrow definitions.

After all, writing centers are creative places. Our directors make the best of small budgets, and tutors are taught to think on their feet. So we know how to adapt. When I did my literature search to begin

this article, I was a little surprised by what I found. Writing centers house creative and often radical academics, so I expected to see complete and utter resistance to corporatization. Instead, some suggested adapting corporate models to suit our own needs, and most of the articles I found suggested flexibility, offering ways to work within or around such models. For instance, Daniel Mahala urges writing centers to make the best of a bad situation by “selectively identifying institutional pressures that strengthen its [the writing center’s] democratic vision of literacy, thereby enriching the practice of writing on campus as well as the training of tutors in the writing center” (2007:13). This kind of reaction highlights the creativity and the pragmatism of writing center directors. If corporatization is going to be a fact of academic life, then it is going to be viewed as just one more obstacle to overcome.

While I cannot say that I see writing centers as the solution to the rise of corporate universities, I don’t see them entirely acquiescing, either. For me, the Writing Center is a model of resistance. From their inception, writing centers have striven to be non-hierarchical. Peers, rather than specially hired professionals, serve as tutors, and re-defining the meaning of authority by means of tutor “peerness” has been a hallmark of writing center theory. We work one-on-one with students, tailoring each session to the needs of that particular student. Furthermore, our work is not evaluative; tutors do not give out grades. This reduces the element of fear in students by removing the looming threat of punitive harm. And our flexibility allows us to truly “comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” With our small budgets and low institutional status, writing center folk may not be able to fundamentally alter the structure of the university, but by modelling for students an alternative approach to writing and educational theory, our job itself highlights the increasingly hegemonic control of standardized education.

I would like to conclude this commentary with an anecdote. To help make our Writing Center a more inviting space, we decided something had to be done about our drab, institutionally taupe walls. One of our tutors, an art student, offered to paint designs incorporating several dead languages across

the walls. This was great, we thought, since translating misunderstood writing is what we are all about. He figured out how to spell “Writing Center” (or an approximation) in Phoenician, Runes, Tibetan, and Egyptian hieroglyphics. We chipped in for the materials and he began to work.

After a few weeks of progress, with the painting nearly completed, an administrator noticed what we were doing and alerted the dean. She emailed us irate that we had not consulted her before starting to paint the walls. The dean worried that we would set a negative precedent for the campus. Emphasizing a need to retain control, she reminded our director of similar policies limiting professors from decorating or personalizing their cubicles. However, our director was able to smooth things over, and the painting was finished. We had broken campus rules of standardization, choosing to be different rather than normalized. We decided to continue the dead language theme onto our brochures, and even featured the artwork on the cover of our annual publication of student academic writing, *The Writing Center Review*. If our Center was going to be “branded,” we wanted that identification to be of our own design.

One day, we saw our dean (and CEO) walking down the hall, giving a corporate donor a personal, guided tour. She stopped near our door. “And this is our Writing Center.” Unable to fully account for us, she paused, then added tersely, “As you can see, they do their own thing in there.” No other description could have made us happier.

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