Gender in the Writing Center

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Gender and Communication

➔ How would you describe stereotypically masucline and feminine forms of communication?
  ◆ Is one or the other privileged in academics?
    ● What about in the writing center?
➔ The writing center has been described as a feminized space.
  ◆ What does this mean?
  ◆ Is a "feminized" writing center a good or bad thing?

Sex in the center: Gender differences in tutorial interactions

Ben Rafoth, Bill Macauley, Kristin Stoltenberg, Steve Housenick, Jerome Brown, and Beth Baran

➔ **Main Idea:**
  ◆ Gender is a part of the tutorial, and there should be open communication about the possible effects of gender dynamics.
➔ **Introduction:**
  ◆ It's hard to talk about gender, and people would rather avoid it.
    ● "a person who brings up gender in a class discussion may be viewed with suspicion as others try to guess where the person stands and then pin a label on him or her" (1)
      ○ This article was published in 1999. Does this attitude still hold true today?
➔ **Awareness of Gender:**
  ◆ Gender is a relatively visible characteristics
    ● "The awareness of gender that we have on a day-to-day basis is grounded not just in some abstract stereotype which society or media has taught us about what's masculine and what's feminine but in the small yet very real characteristics of individual people. At the same time, it cannot be denied that most people tend toward a masculine or feminine identity based on similar characteristics. As the tutor said above, 'It's partly about gender, yes, but that's not all of it.'" (2)
      ○ What does this imply about the fundamental nature of gender?
      ○ Do you agree or disagree with this assertion?
  ◆ Gender Bias
    ● Baby Example: When choosing photos for greeting cards baby boys tend to be shown active and playing where as girls are shown as passive and sleeping.

- ➔ **Does Gender Make a Difference?**
  - ◆ Authors question what differences gender could possibly make on the tutorial.
  - ◆ Many people who work at the authors' writing center do not believe gender has an impact, and those that doe believe it has an impact question themselves.
    - ● Do you think that gender makes a difference based on your own personal beliefs and experiences?
- ➔ **Two Perspectives:**
  - ◆ Deborah Tannen: "communication is a kind of ritual. Men and women talk the way they do because they have been taught, one generation to the next, to talk that way."(3)
    - ● Conflicts are based on different styles of communication
    - ● Gendered communication is learned through culture and new styles can be learned
  - ◆ John Gary: Men and women have fundamentally different needs. Women need to be cherished and men to be needed.
    - ● Conflicts are based on men or women forgetting the other may have a different goal in communication.
    - ● The genders are distinctly different, and these differences may be irreconcilable.
  - ◆ What are the pros and cons of each theory?
  - ◆ Interactions may have multiple potential interpretations
    - ● Ex: Female doctor mistaken as a nurse refuses to see it as an insult.
- ➔ **What Tutors Say About Gender Based Behaviors:**
  - ◆ Tutors role-played four scenarios with different gender roles. These role plays were unscripted, spontaneous, and purposefully over-exaggerated
    - ● Male Tutor-Male Student→ Very task-oriented and business-like
    - ● Male Tutor-Female Student→ Male tutor dominated discussion
    - ● Female Tutor-Female Student→ Lots of discussion, felt like neither wanted to let conversation stop
    - ● Female-Tutor-Male Student→ Student dismissive and unengaged
  - ◆ A group of tutors view these role-plays and came to two general conclusions:
    - ● (1) Gender does play some role in the tutorial, although there was disagreement as to what that role is.
    - ● (2) Both parties are responsible for the sessions, but tutors have the power to guide sessions at any time.
      - ○ "one always has the power to change the status quo in a communicative event" (5)
        - ◆ Do you agree or disagree?
- ➔ **An Informal Survey:**
  - ◆ Surveyed tutors and students from 41 different tutoring sessions
  - ◆ 71% of students and tutors identified the tutor, male or female, to be the one that did the most talking

- Majority of respondents described relationship between student and tutor as professions
- 29% of female-female called it personal
- 62% of writers and 74% of tutors say gender didn't matter
- 86% of both tutors and writers said the session would have been different with different people.
- About 50% said a different gender would have changed things

IT'S NOT ABOUT WHAT YOU SAY, BUT HOW YOU SAY IT (AND TO WHOM): ACCOMMODATING GENDER IN THE WRITING CENTER

Claire Elizabeth O'Leary

➔ **What the research says about gender in the writing center?**
  - Content is not the only factor that determines the course of a conversation. More visible social characteristics like race, gender, and age play a role as well.
    - Gender is reproduced in conversation in general, and therefore possibly in the writing center as well
  - Studies have shown that students and tutors manifest gender roles to some extent in conversation (Hunzer; Black)
  - Formal v. Informal Conversation (the most important factor)
    - In formal conversation there is little difference between the conversation styles of the person empowered, regardless of gender
  - In teaching situations, the empowered individual will adapt conversation style to match the student.
    - Female students are more likely to facilitate the talk and take a subordinate role in the conversation
    - Male students refuse to take the subordinate resist suggestions
      - This aligns with the role of men and women in informal conversation
  - "[A] main determinant of linguistic behavior in formal conversation (like that of a writing conference) is how participants perceive their status relative to one another." (63)
➔ **Study**
  - O'Leary wants to examine if the same rules for conferences with graduate-student and professor-tutors applies to peer-tutors as well.
  - Four conferences with two different tutors in a 'neutral' setting
    - Both Tutors are female
      - Each works on the same assignment with two different students (one male, one female)
      - 'Anna' worked with 'Rich' and 'Jillian'
      - 'Jane' worked with 'Benjamin' and 'Alexis'

➔ **Results**

Anna and Rich	Anna and Jillian
- Less formal - More talk-time - Less self-doubt - Both masuline (assertive)and feminine (active listening) traits	- Less formal - Less talk-time - More self doubt - Assumed a more feminine conversation style - Gave the power to Anna
Jane and Benjamin	Jane and Alexis
- More formal - Underprepared and unwilling to work - Combative conversation style - Embodies a more masculine style of conversation with authority	- More formal - More prepared, and willing to follow Jane's lead - Friendlier tone - Shows a more feminine style of conversation in deferring to authority

➔ **Analyze the conferences:**
   ◆ About Benjamin: "He had no grounds upon which to defend his work, and would have had to defer to Jane's knowledge of the writing process--thereby assuming a low-status conversational role. Instead, he chose not to talk at all." (68)
   ◆ Which conference did you think was the best? What about the worst?
      ● Why?
   ◆ What does this study say about preferred forms of communication in the writing center with regards to gender?
➔ **Conclusion:**
   ◆ Writing-fellows do make accommodations for their students' performances of gender. This is even more true in less formal conferences.
   ◆ "Raising awareness of how gender may be performed by students and tutors during a writing conference may lead to an examination of what tutoring techniques can be used to effectively accommodate gender sameness or difference without actively encouraging gendered conversational behaviors that reinforce gender norms." (70)

A Critique of Both Readings
➔ Exclusion of gender non-confroming and non-binary, gender identities from the discussion
   ◆ What are some ways that the writing center, and writing in general can be more inclusive for all gender identities?
      ● Ex: pronouns
         ○ What are your pronoun practices? Do you default to one gendered pronouns?