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Gendering the Writing Center

Introduction

All Writing Associates alike engage in tutor training after their hire to a writing center, during which they observe, recognize, analyze, and actualize pedagogical approaches to tutoring. The training is intended to provide new Writing Associates with the tools and techniques necessary for effective tutoring. As Tennyson O'Donnell, Director of Trinity College's Allan K. Smith Center for Writing and Rhetoric, says "what you are doing will not change but why and when you are doing it will" (O'Donnell). In this, O'Donnell illuminates the importance of the tutor's awareness of certain situations and attributes that complicate the tutoring process and threaten productive collaboration. As a growing Writing Associate emerging from O'Donnell's tutor training program, I feel equipped to take on challenges I face in my one-on-one tutoring appointments as I have begun to further understand the reasons behind tutoring methods. However, no training of this sort can be complete without an analysis of gender.

Discussions of gender are few and far between simply because nobody wants to talk about it. Conversations of this sort are uncomfortable because they challenge the everyday dynamics between men and women and, as a result, are frequently avoided. Therefore, it becomes impossible to scrutinize gender dynamics between tutors and tutees alone without dismantling the system of power produced by performed stereotypes. As much as we possess the ability to gender writing centers, we cannot do so without recognizing gender dynamics in all

aspects of our everyday lives. While this widens and complicates our process of gendering writing centers, it also severely amplifies both the impact and the significance of our findings.

The Philosophy of Gender

Before investigating how gender affects the dynamic of tutor and tutee relationships in writing centers, we must first ascertain the meaning of “gender” and come to understand how it takes shape in our lives universally. Contemporary philosopher Judith Butler defines “gender as the ‘certain relations’ that transform [biological sex]” (Brady and Schirato 32). In their theory on gender, Butler critiques the usual distinction made between sex and gender and offers their own, namely that “sex is a sexual difference... understood as a discursively produced organizing framework” while “gender is the process (social, cultural, economic, political) by which sex comes to appear as though it is a materially different thing from the gendering processes that render it intelligible” (Brady and Schirato 37). In other words, gender is a necessary performance through which the body can be understood. Therefore, gender is “something one is compelled to do in order to be constituted as a recognizable human subject” because a “body does not become... readable without those signs [of gender]” (Brady and Schirato 44-45, 34). According to Butler, then, gender is a performance required in order to be made legible by society.

But what about the performance of gender makes a body legible? When the “sex and gender cohere (and continue to cohere) in a particular, and normative, way,” the body is legible, or rather, the body makes sense to others (Brady and Schirato 36). Therefore, the “range of acceptability [of a body] is routinely aligned with the normative expectations of gender” in that a body is acceptable, and legible, when the sex and gender not only cohere but when the coherence corresponds to the expectations of gender (Brady and Schirato 33). Legible performances of

gender, then, both produce and reinforce the norms, or stereotypes, of sexual and gender identity (Brady and Schirato 48). Butler implies here that humans tend to make sense of the world around them, and, more specifically, the people around them, through gender; we rely on performances of gender to render certain bodies legible and others not. This illuminates the significance of gender performativity as it is our method for making sense of the world. Consequently, it is crucial for each of us to both observe the performances of gender of others and to perform gender ourselves so that we can make sense of our reality and, as a result, feel comfortable in it.

Expectations of Tutors v. Expectations of Gender

Why does this matter in the context of tutoring, especially tutoring at the writing center? When students approach a one-on-one tutoring session with a Writing Associate, they enter the relationship with expectations. Because they are coming to the writing center to be tutored, it's only natural that they have expectations of the tutor as a tutor; they expect the tutor to conduct themselves, and the session, in a way that, according to the student, a tutor normally does or should do. In her essay "On Becoming A More Effective Tutor," Lil Brannon defines the four roles a tutor can play, which naturally correspond to the roles a tutee can expect a tutor to play. Below Figure 1 describes each of the four roles of a tutor.

Facilitator	Supporter	Leader	Register
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tutor is the audience · Tutor leads the student to correct and learn on their own · Power and control is roughly equal between tutor and tutee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tutor encourages and rewards · Student holds the control and the responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tutor requires engagement from the student · Student feels coerced into the session and may become embarrassed or defensive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tutor does not establish common ground with tutee · Little to no communication between tutor and tutee

Figure 1: The Four Roles a Tutor Can Play (Hunzer 1-2).

Additionally, there are three general styles of tutoring that tutors can approach their sessions with, as outlined in Figure 2 below.

Sociable	Directive	Balanced
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tutor establishes a friendly and relaxed · Tutor gives too much praise and not enough advice · Tutor prioritizes boosting tutee's self-esteem over growing their writing ability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Tutor assumes too much responsibility · Tutor controls the session · Tutor tends to re-write tutee's essay and may cause tutee to feel inadequate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Between the two extremes of sociable and directive approaches · Tutor allows tutee to find their own errors and ask questions · Sociable atmosphere · Task-oriented · Tutor has heightened awareness of what they say and how/why they say it
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Figure 2: The Three Approaches a Tutor Can Take (Hunzer 2).

While the tutee may come into the appointment expecting the tutor's behavior to cohere with that of a particular role and approach, other identities of the tutor also inform the tutee's expectations.

Gender, because it "is among the most easily noticed," heavily influences the expectations the tutee has (Rafoth et al. 3). While a tutee can attempt to make sense of their relationship with a tutor by categorizing the tutor's conduct as it relates to their identity as a tutor, so too can tutees attempt to make sense of their relationship with a tutor by categorizing the tutor's conduct as it relates to the tutor's gender identity. While the tutor's identity as a tutor and the tutee's conception of what a tutor does provides the foundation for the tutee to form tutor expectations, what provides the foundation for the formation of gender expectations?

Because performance of gender renders a body legible when it cites gender norms, it must be the stereotypes, which are extracted from the norms, that provide the foundation for forming gender expectations. As a result, "students come to the center expecting the tutors to fit into the societal stereotypes that revolve around gender" (Hunzer 3). The expectations drawn from societal stereotypes coerce male and female people, not to mention tutors, to perform in a

way that conforms to these societal stereotypes. This follows Butler's idea that performance both produces and reiterates the norm. The primary societal stereotypes are listed in Figure 3 below.

Male	Female
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Frank and straightforward · Objective · Analytic · Less skilled at listening · Focused · Active · Aggressive · Self-assertive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Deferent · Non-assertive · Sensitive · Caring · Emotionally involved · Casual · Good listeners · Concerned with self-expression · More cooperative rather than directive speakers

Figure 3: Common Societal Stereotypes of Males and Females (Hunzer 3).

Kathleen M. Hunzer, in “Gender Expectations and Relationships in the Writing Center,” parallels these two separate forms of expectations, tutor expectations and gender expectations, in order to illustrate how they function together and possibly conflict. While the tutor conducts the tutoring session, thereby assuming one of the roles of a tutor, they simultaneously are performing gender. Unfortunately, however, expectations of gender can in fact conflict with expectations of a tutor. For instance, if the tutee approaches his tutoring appointment expecting the tutor to assume the role of a “leader,” the tutee will expect the tutor to assume most of the control in the session and take a directive approach to tutoring. However, when the tutee forms gender expectations, the tutee may realize that in fact he is expecting his tutor to be non-assertive and good at listening because his tutor is female. Which expectation, tutor or gender, will take precedence when the tutor is performing her identities of tutor and female simultaneously?

Hunzer conducted research to investigate this. She interviewed five students who frequently attended the writing center at West Chester University, asking them to describe and compare their experiences with female and male tutors. Although the students entered their

appointments with different tutor and gender expectations, Hunzer found that most students expected and perceived female tutors to be “caring, supportive, deferent, and self-expressive” while male tutors were expected and perceived to be “assertive, directive, and task-centered” (Hunzer 12). Hunzer argues that this difference between male and female tutors would not have been found “if the generalized role of ‘tutor’ were the dominant one” (Hunzer 12). Therefore, gender roles have the ability to, and frequently do, “permeate and subsequently affect the outcome of the tutorial situation” (Hunzer 12). The prioritization of the expected and perceived behavior of the tutor to cohere with gender roles over tutor roles demonstrates the immense power gender stereotypes have in influencing the ways in which we conceive of and behave in the world around us. While this section has addressed the influence of gender roles in the tutee’s construction of expectations of their tutor, the influence of gender roles encroaches much more deeply into writing centers.

Analyzing Tutor and Tutee Relationship Through a Gendered Lens

Not only does the tutee develop expectations of their tutor, but the tutor likewise forms expectations of their tutee. The tutor and the tutee, therefore, are both expected to perform in accordance with stereotypical gender roles so that both of their bodies become legible, to themselves, each other, and society. In turn, their relationship will also be rendered legible since the interaction will uphold the gender roles that each person, the tutor and the tutee, conformed to. Authors of “Sex in the Center: Gender Differences in Tutorial Interactions” observed the role-play of their Writing Associates in order to investigate the ways in which gender roles influence writing center appointments. The Writing Associates were told to “demonstrate through role-

playing ‘classic’ male or female behaviors (Rafoth et al. 4). Below Figure 4 offers a description of tutorial sessions as they correspond to the gender identity of the tutor and the tutee.

Male Tutor- Male Tutee	Male Tutor- Female Tutee	Female Tutor- Female Tutee	Female Tutor- Male Tutee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Quick greet and immediately begin work · Little exploration of the assignment · Nodding and minimal communication · Focused to complete the task quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Opened with a brief chat, but began work quickly · Male tutor dominated speech and interrupted twice · Male tutor asked many questions · Female tutee appeared nervous and uncomfortable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Both eager to cooperate · Frequent eye-contact · Picked up on cues from the other · Appeared to feel the need to continue the conversation · Tutee got the help that she wanted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Male tutee seemed disinterested in help · Male tutee disengaged: fixing his hair and looking around the room, at the ceiling, and at his watch · Female tutor tried to read handwriting

Figure 4: The Effect of Gender Identity on Tutorial Sessions (Rafoth et al. 4).

Although Rafoth et al. recognizes that these interactions were fictional, they value their capacity to “create the opportunity for critical perspectives on issues of gender by using the tutorial context tutors are most familiar with” (Rafoth et al. 4). Therefore, even though these specific interactions did not take place, they likely depict, with some dramatization, the sorts of interactions that do occur at the writing center every day. Because it has already been established, in earlier sections of this essay, that gender roles greatly influence tutorial sessions, the research conducted by Rafoth et al. provides us concrete insight into the ways in which tutorial sessions are affected by gender, despite the study’s fabricated role-playing.

The differences between the four tutorial sessions described in Figure 4, differences that correlate to the gender identity of tutors and tutees, display various distributions of power

between the tutor and the tutee. In the tutorial session where the tutor identified as male and the tutee as female, the male tutor dominated the session (Rafoth et al. 4). His display of power, observed through his control of the session's speech and frequent interruption of the tutee, is his performance of gender. Societal stereotypes require those who identify as male to be aggressive, straightforward, and not good listeners (Hunzer 3). The tutor's body becomes legible when he performs these gender expectations.

The tutorial session with the female tutor and the male tutee, on the other hand, illustrates a situation in which the female assumes the power, a performance that does not cohere with gender expectations (Rafoth et al. 4). The male tutee practically ignores the female tutor because he is uncomfortable with her display of power. Her body is unintelligible to him because she does not perform according to gender stereotypes. Even further, his own body becomes unintelligible because, so long as she maintains power, he is unable to and therefore cannot perform his own gender stereotype. As a consequence, the tutorial session is uncomfortable for both the tutor and the tutee because their relationship is unintelligible, and conflict ensues. In "The Writing Center as a Burkean Parlor: The Influence of Gender and the Dual Engines of Power: Collaboration and Conflict," Clara Louise Enoch argues that "gender conflict surfaces in the writing center because most tutors are not comfortable dealing with issues such as power struggles between men and women" (Enoch 2).

Power in the Writing Center

Tutors are automatically put into a position of power over their tutee simply because they have been recognized for their knowledge and expertise and are expected to transfer this to the tutee. However, "tutees can anticipate that their tutorial relationships with tutors will be more

of a 'meeting of equals' than are those with classroom teachers" because tutors do not evaluate the tutees writing with grades (Enoch 9). Therefore, tutors, as perceived aside from their gender identity, are "'peers with authority'" (Enoch 8). Thus, the power dynamic between the tutor and their tutee is important to observe when gender roles complicate the expectations of a tutor.

This conception of power and authority in the writing center allows us to further analyze and explain the female tutor's tutorial session with the male tutee. She conducts the session as a peer with authority and yet the male tutee becomes disengaged, presumably as a result of the tutor's disinclination to conform to gender stereotypes. Margaret O. Tipper attributes this to the reason why male students are less likely to go to the writing center. In "Real Men Don't Do Writing Centers," Tipper expresses that "many guys do not want to use the Writing Center... [because] needing help is a sign of weakness... [and] receiving help puts one in a lower status position relative to the helper and signals dependency" (Tipper 35). Because their position as tutee compromises their ability to perform according to the stereotypes of their gender, male students are much less likely to put themselves into the position of a tutee as it will render their body unintelligible and they will be unable to make sense of the gendered interaction they experience.

It seems as though a common approach to this problem, and any issue that raises discomfort in the writing center, has been to make writing centers a more comfortable place. In doing this, writing centers "have [been] taken... out of the competitive academic mainstream and have [been] made... places for cooperation," not places where tutors or clients are graded but rather "places of reflection" (Tipper 37-38). Further, "students work one-to-one as peers, as equals" in writing centers and writing centers "reject the idea that there is one right way to approach the writing task" (Tipper 38). Incidentally, these common writing center characteristics

and ideals do not cohere with the stereotypical preferences of male tutors or tutees: “a preference for action over reflection, an experience of the ‘other’ as either a rival or a comrade against a common enemy, a tendency to black and white thinking (right and wrong), a concern with rank and hierarchy in relationships, and a preference for groups rather than one-to-one consultations” (Tipper 37). It’s no surprise, then, that we may be less likely to find male tutors and tutees in the writing center; writing centers are feminized spaces “‘marked by social notions of what women provide- refuge, nurturance, emotional support, [and] personal guidance’” (Tipper 35). While male tutees may find it uncomfortable in the writing center because they are performing in a role less authoritative than males are typically used to performing, male tutors may find the writing center to be an uncomfortable place too. For male tutors, this “nondirective style [of tutoring], which has reached the level of icon in writing center practice, seems counter-intuitive” as male tutors tend to “desperately long to just get in there and fix up a client’s paper” (Tipper 36).

Many times, then, male tutors sacrifice the pedagogical techniques of indirect tutoring in order to perform their gender stereotype; the position of power as a tutor is natural to them. Rather than approaching the tutorial session with an indirective approach that might “hide” some of his authority, the male tutor is likely to approach the tutorial session with directive pedagogical techniques because those method of teaching and learning makes sense to him, as they favor preferences of his gender stereotype, and because those methods enable him to assume a more authoritative position that is in coherence with gendered stereotypes of power.

Gendering the Trinity College Writing Center

What shape do gendered struggles of power take in our Writing Center at Trinity College? As a female tutor, I find myself prioritizing my fulfillment of gender expectations over

the fulfillment of tutor expectations. This is especially noticeable in my e-tutoring sessions as, when commenting on the paper, I feel the need to begin almost every comment with “Maybe...” as in:

“Maybe consider breaking this paragraph into two separate paragraphs. To me it seemed like the best place to break the paragraph is here, but you know best. It’s not crucial that you even split the paragraph, it’s just a suggestion I thought of.”

Why do I feel compelled to be so passive here? Although “men and women are biologically equipped with the same verbal skills, [they] can be motivated through socialization to communicate differently” (Enoch 28). Women, therefore, are likely to incorporate their voice into their performance of gender. Typically, “women suffocate their voice in order to survive in society” (Enoch 29). I believe this is my tendency in my e-tutoring appointments. Because our work is asynchronous and I do not have the opportunity to meet the tutee, whether in person or through a computer screen, I unconsciously feel uncomfortable with the automatic authority I assume as a tutor. I am unable to demonstrate my equality to the tutee outside of the comments I leave for them, so I resort to prioritizing gender performance in the voice of my comments. This certainly hinders the productivity of the appointment because as a tutor I have the duty to transfer my knowledge to the tutee. When I fail to assume this authority, and fulfill my role as a tutor, my tutoring becomes less effective because my voice of expertise as a tutor becomes diluted or washed away.

In my online appointments, where I do have the opportunity to establish common ground with the tutee, I find myself much less compelled to present my comments in this way. Perhaps this occurs sometimes, naturally, both in a conscious effort to make a more comfortable space and unconsciously as I perform my gender role. Yet, allowing me an opportunity to work with

the tutee synchronously, albeit through computer, also allows the tutee the opportunity to demonstrate their power and authority directly to me in the session. I have noticed that I tend to have less control over the session when the tutee is male rather than female. Only one of my female clients took responsibility for their paper in a way that put me in the passenger's seat. On the other side of that, I do find myself interrupted by male tutees. Although I may attribute some of this to the lack of social cues and ensuing awkwardness that characterizes video chats, the fact that men tend to interrupt more often leads me to believe that this behavior stems from their desire to dominate in their performance of gender. Furthermore, I find myself generally more likely to surrender power to male tutees rather than female tutees.

While I cannot speak from experience about the effect gender has on in person tutorial sessions, I would hypothesize that gender tensions are much more extreme when face-to-face. While the atmosphere of writing centers allows for further opportunity to establish a bond of equals between the tutor and the tutee, the vulnerability of face-to-face interactions might heighten gender related tension, if it were to arise.

Bettering Our Tutoring Philosophy and Approach

Although it may appear easier, and perhaps even plausible, to write off gender tensions and the consequent struggle for power as universal issues and not ones based in or unique to writing centers, writing centers have the responsibility to address these issues because they so heavily influence the effectiveness of tutorial sessions.

How do we go about bettering a place where male gender identities may feel unwelcome or uncomfortable and female gender identities continue to be suppressed? It seems realistic to suggest, then, that it would be beneficial if both the tutor and the tutee had an awareness of

Butler's gender theory as it would inform our understanding of the habits of the other party in the session. While this can be something to strive towards, both in writing center communities and in our daily surrounding environment, writing centers must focus on educating their tutors about gender performativity and how it can take shape in writing centers specifically.

Here at Trinity I believe gender should be a topic that is prioritized in Writing Theories and Practices, the course that new Writing Associates take for training. Because tutors have the agency to "at any point try to change the direction of a session that is not going well," then the "effects [of gender on tutorials] can be overcome with knowledge and awareness" (Rafoth et al. 4). Therefore, "educators should include gender issues in tutor training" because "discussing stereotypes, finding solutions to offset stereotypes, and training tutors on how to recognize and deal with these issues is crucial" to the work of the writing center (Enoch 34). Enoch suggests, and I agree, that role-play should be used as a method to educate tutors about gender performativity because of its ability to "address conflicts that surface because of seating, power struggles, misunderstandings, and other problems that tutors and tutees bring with them when they enter the writing center," (Enoch 40).

However, resisting the tendency to conform to gender roles may render the bodies within the interaction, the relationship between the bodies, and the interaction itself as unintelligible. We use gender performance as a way of making sense of the world around us, so when we resist performing in accordance with stereotypes, with what "makes sense," things likely will not make sense. Yes, we will be uncomfortable in this process. Yet, we must recognize that "the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' [as determined by gender performance] are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but rather socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (Brady and Schirato 37). In our resistance to perform in a way that makes our

body legible, we must remember that evaluating the legibility of bodies is a habit rooted in social norms that are produced and reinforced through gender performance; the basis for establishing legibility is meaningless.

Challenging the Binary

It is crucial, however, that we step back and recognize what this essay has done. Although the gendering of the writing center revealed the negative impact of compulsive gender performativity on the power dynamic and success of the tutorial, we must realize that this only addresses the binary. Tutors and tutees may not identify as male or female and the research presented in this essay fails to acknowledge that. In fact, this lack of acknowledgement functions to exclude other gender identities from the writing center.

In an essay that argues for the dismantling of gender stereotypes and gender performativity, it would be hypocritical to not acknowledge gender identities outside of the binary. The bodies that “disturb the binary system of [sex and gender]... threaten to call into question... the performative moves by which those systems are able to proliferate undisturbed in their everyday regulation of every other body” (Brady and Schirato 44). According to Butler’s theory, gender identities that do not fit within the binary are unintelligible. These bodies are further cast to be the perpetual other when they are excluded from writing center research and spaces.

As we call for our work in the writing center to resist the influence of gender performativity, Butler suggests that “rather than seeking to locate resistance outside or prior to heteronormative signifying systems,” we must “rethink the ‘possibilities for identity within the terms of power itself’” (Brady and Schirato 49). Perhaps, then, we must focus on the exclusion

of gender identities outside of the binary in order to dismantle gender performativity in writing centers. Working to include these gender identities is necessary to both the writing center's values of inclusion and equality and the writing center's commitment to collaborative learning. Inclusion of these bodies will both uphold the writing center's reputation as a place of diversity and inform and support the work to remove the influence gender identity has on our ability to successfully engage in collaborative learning.

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