

Writing Centers: Artists Creating Contact Zones

Writing centers have traditionally been thought of as spaces on college campuses in which tutors and tutees can collaborate on a work to better the writing skills of both parties involved in the tutoring session. This, ideally, has been accomplished through the creation of a safe space, or a space in which the tutee feels comfortable sharing their ideas with the tutor. The artistic aspects of writing are vast, and it is not a contested notion that writing is itself a form of art. Authors of novels and researchers who compile journals of scholarly works “make sense of the insensible” (Sherwood, 53), and in a sense, that is also the tutor’s task when helping a student to either polish their work or get their ideas onto the page. If a tutor utilizes these methods of viewing themselves as an artist, while simultaneously creating a safe space for students through responses that are traditionally geared towards creative pieces, then they are better equipped to face problematic sessions in which students may not necessarily feel like the writing center is a safe place. For example, a disabled student who is unable to have a traditional writing center experience because of their disability will be more comfortable in a tutoring session if the tutor is able to cater to the student’s unique needs, just like an artist is able to improvise on a work. As a result of this merging of different perspectives, a contact zone is created, and intellectual stimulation as well as a more meaningful learning experience can be had by both parties involved in the exchange.

The tutors themselves take on this challenge of creating this safe space in a manner that

imitates that of an artist. The tutor and artist both interpret subjects differently, as an artist will depict an object in a unique way and a tutor might interpret a tutee's writing in a specific way. For example, one artist may see a guitar and decide to render it abstractly with the different parts of the instrument having little to no relation to the original model. Another artist may choose to render the subject hyper-realistically so as to ensure the viewer does not doubt what they are looking at. Similarly, a writer may interpret a novel to be a larger metaphor for a global phenomenon, while another may merely see the work as a biographical memoir. The tutor as an artist improvises as a session progresses, adjusting their approach to fit and cater to the different students that come to the writing center for help and expertise. In responding to a student's work in the writing center, tutors should approach all forms of writing as if the writing is the student's own work of art. In doing so, the tutor must approach the session with an open mind and indirectly provide feedback through the form of questions. Through this method of asking questions, the tutor is able to create a safe environment in which a tutee will be able to improve as a writer, and the two involved in the session will be able to break down barriers that may have kept them from having a stimulating, intellectual conversation before.

The practice of tutoring is best viewed as an art form in and of itself, as it takes different shapes as professionals encounter a variety of different students who bring to sessions a variety of different needs. Steve Sherwood's work "Portrait of the Tutor as an Artist: Lessons No One Can Teach" gets at this idea of tutoring as an art form, and this perspective can help writing associates approach sessions with an emphasis on adapting to the situation. By avoiding being too rigid in their craft, tutors are able to be more inclusive in their work with students and thus make the entire population of students more comfortable bringing their work for review at the writing center. Tutoring while responding to creative pieces of work, like a painting or sculpture

for example, can require the tutor to take an even more innovative and indirect approach to helping the tutee that has presented them with the task than a more traditional form of writing, like a research paper, would. This challenge parallels the challenges that tutors might face in encountering varying degrees of either experience or ability among students, Christine Mulcaney, in her article “The Story in the Picture: Inquiry and Artmaking with Young Children; Talking with Children about Art”, provides the reader with an approach to talking to, specifically children, about art, which in turn can be applied to how writing associates can go about speaking to their tutees about creative writing pieces, or studio art and art historical papers. Tutors must embrace their identities as artists themselves by approaching sessions with the expectation that they will have to improvise. In staying committed to this approach to tutoring, writing associates can better cater to the student and their work, no matter the level of experience or unique situation the tutor may be presented with. Margaret Winton’s article entitled “d/Deaf Culture and Translingualism in the Writing Center” provides us with an example of how, although disabled students may not see the writing center as a particularly safe space, tutors can work to change that perspective by approaching sessions from an artistic point of view. The concept that Winton refers to as changing centers of reference emphasizes the fact that everyone uses their own personal interpretations to relate to others, and because we cannot control how others think or operate in academic settings, we must take an indirect approach to tutoring in these cases in order to best achieve a safe zone where academic progress can be made.

In order to best practice offering indirect advice to students, with an open mind and while taking into account differing centers of reference that we all have when approaching the topic of art itself, we must combine the lessons taught by the previously mentioned literature. Additionally, in viewing oneself and one’s tutoring practice as an artform in and of itself, writing

associates can better understand the tutee's needs and tackle sessions with a more open minded and indirect approach to various forms of writing and issues that they may be presented in the writing center.

When considering how to respond to a student's unique piece of writing, a tutor can approach the subject in a manner similar to how a teacher might approach speaking to young children about either their art, or someone else's art. Mulcaney's blueprint on how teachers can go about responding to and prompting discussions about different art forms suggests that teachers should delicately approach the subject, and that they should focus on asking the student questions to facilitate conversation and provoke thought. Although Mulcaney's method deals with talking to specifically children about art, we can alter her suggestions to more appropriately fit a setting in which young adults are helping other young adults in the writing center. No matter the tutor or teacher's level of experience in talking to others either about art or writing more generally, it is always difficult in these situations to speak to others about their own work or interpretation of someone else's work due to differing centers of reference and opinions on various subjects. Past approaches to the subject of responding to art in the writing center have been subject based, and focused on "understanding what the artist is trying to do" (Mulcaney, 1). However, an important point is made by all three authors of the articles I am considering, in that who is to say what the artist was trying to do, other than the artist themselves?

It is an indisputable fact that different students will have vastly different interpretations of the same work of art, or the same essay prompt. It is especially important that in a setting like a writing center, writing associates prioritize letting the student freely express their own interpretation, just as Mulcaney emphasizes in the classroom of young children, in order to create "a safe environment for engaging with the artwork, and allows the children to construct their

own meanings” (2). In order to accomplish this goal of creating a safe environment, writing centers should prioritize creating the kind of “contact zones” that we learned about in our readings. Tutors can do this by asking their tutees open-ended questions, in order to create a tangible way of assuring the tutee that the tutor is interested in maintaining the student’s voice in the work, rather than merely providing them with a corrective system that turns into a “fix-it” shop setting. This Socratic method of tutoring through question asking is ““designed to elicit insights based on what the learner already knows, which encourages the learner to develop and use his or her knowledge independently...” (1), and as a result maintains the student’s integrity and allows them to learn more from the process of visiting the writing center. A safe house, as defined by Mary Louise Pratt, refers to a “social and intellectual space where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (Pratt, 40). This space serves to benefit both the tutor and tutee in each session, as both parties involved feel comfortable enough to share their true interpretations of a work, and as a result of this stimulating conversation, a better piece of writing can be produced by the tutee, with the help of the tutor.

When working with students of varying levels of skill or different ages, tutors must be able to put themselves in the shoes of the student and empathize with where they are coming from in their struggles or questions. Children, for example, often have varying interpretations when presented with the same subject, and will often answer the same question differently based on “the lens through which he or she is looking and the developmental age of the child” (Mulcaney, 3). In order to work with these shifting perspectives and vastly different lenses of interpretation, the tutor should create a dialogue, as it is the tutor’s responsibility to make the

student comfortable while simultaneously yielding the proper amount of power and authority in a particular session. The only way a tutor can fully understand the student's interpretation of a work is by asking questions, to both show interest and get the student to explain their point of view or unique interpretation in crafting the piece of writing. If we, as writing associates, adopt the mindset that art and writing go hand in hand, we can realize that someone's writing is essentially their own work of art, and because of this, it does not necessarily look like yours, or anyone else's. Artists also interpret their subjects very differently from one another, and when responding to creative works there is no right or wrong answer. Thus, approaching a tutoring session with the mindset that there is a right or wrong way to respond to a given creative prompt or assignment can harm one's relationship with the tutee, in addition to serving as counterproductive in accomplishing the goals of the session.

Corrective tutoring can have unintended outcomes that serve to regress the productivity of a particular tutoring session. However, an approach that is more indirect and inclusive of questions that prompt a dialogue between the tutor and tutee, allows for a more meaningful relationship between the two, and as a result improves the tutee's relationship with their own work. An adaptive, malleable, and artistic approach to tutoring serves to place the importance and emphasis of any given session on the tutee and their experience in improving their writing for themselves, rather than improving it merely for a higher grade, or for any other reason. Gaining insight into the mind of another student is an everyday issue that writing associates must take on, and this is an increasingly difficult task especially when considering the diversity of backgrounds, opinions, and skill levels students come from at a given college or university.

Unfortunately, and sometimes due to the common method of corrective tutoring, there are a number of students who do not view the writing center as a so-called safe zone in which they

can freely discuss their ideas with a tutor, one whom they may not necessarily be comfortable with. Students are also often uncomfortable with the level of vulnerability required in bringing their writing to the writing center, as they are handing their own prized work over to a peer who has the power to, potentially, tear the piece apart and be overly critical. In order to mitigate this fear among students, tutors must commit themselves to approaching sessions as an artist would approach a painting, or a teacher should approach responding to a young child's prized work of art. Because each student will often present to the writing center a vastly different interpretation of a work, whether it be a book or an artwork that they must respond to, tutors must approach each session with an open mind and tailor their approach to tutoring to fit students differently. Social and intellectual spaces where differing perspectives can create a degree of trust that leads to a shared understanding, subsequently breaking down legacies of oppression, are only possible if the parties involved approach the situation with an open mind and are readily receptive to varying perspectives. For example, students with physical disabilities, like those who are deaf, can be left out of the rhetoric of tutoring approaches in writing centers because there is traditionally an emphasis on reading papers out loud to generate a better understanding of the concepts the student discusses in these writings. This tradition of approaching sessions in a certain, rigid way has served to make deaf students feel excluded from writing centers. Although each individual is unique, tutors can "use tactics already used with other students" (Winton) in order to achieve an inclusive space for all kinds of students.

The concept of differing centers of reference, or the fact that students and tutors responses to situations are shaped by their own personal experiences, is one which tutors must keep in mind while approaching a session as an artist and in responding to creative works in the writing center. In finding a common center of reference with the student, a tutor can work to

better understand the given situation or communicate with the tutee. This allows the two involved in the exchange to better relate to each other, creating a deeper bond that allows them to tackle significant issues in the writing that the student may otherwise feel too vulnerable to face. Tutors should be aware of the differing centers of reference each student, and tutor, comes from when viewing a work or a prompt, since every student has their own interpretation when it comes to answering a writing prompt, and all students come from vastly different and diverse backgrounds that influence these interpretations. Thus, tutors should “remain true to our principles of encouraging diversity” (Rhin, 1) in order to challenge preconceived notions that privileged students may have, and prompt students to push themselves to become better writers. This end-goal that all writing associates should keep in the back of their minds is one that is similar to that which many artists have in creating a piece of art. Artists have traditionally intended to push the boundaries of what is accepted in a culture, and promote thought within the viewers of their works so as to better society as a whole. This, in a way, is what writing associates accomplish in a session with a struggling student. It is up to the tutor on how far they want to push the student in their sessions, and playing it safe is always an option. However, every situation is different, and as artists, tutors must be able to improvise as a session progresses. This improvisation is in itself a form of art, as it proves that tutors are aware of their surroundings, the person they are interacting with, and the material that is in front of them. Given the circumstances, tutors are able to shift focus or guide the student to interpret a subject differently than they might have previously. This ability to rise to a challenging situation that might cause the tutor themselves to put their own personal beliefs on hold in order to benefit the student, is one that requires a neutral approach and the inner-eye of an artist.

Tutors must have the ability to see past their own personal beliefs so as to make the

student feel more comfortable, provide neutral help, and advance the goals of the session. Because they must create a feeling of trust, it is important that tutors are open and honest with their tutee in order to get the most out of a given session. The central element of work in the writing center is the settings' unique "role as a contact zone and safe house" (Rhin, 1). In order to get here, writing associates must embrace their identity as artists. They must approach responding to works that are presented in ways similar to those which Mulcaney has detailed, and in doing so, tutors can accomplish a greater good than merely editing a paper for grammatical errors. It should be the tutor's goal to encourage their tutees to embrace their identities as students, find their voice within a given work, and push them to their potential as thinkers and writers.

The writing associate's identity as an artist is integral to ensuring that the role of the writing center is to provide a safe place in which students can freely express their academic ideas and improve their writing in multiple ways. An artist has been defined as someone who is skilled in a particular occupation or task, and thus, the tutor should be considered an artist and embrace all of the benefits that come with this title. An ability to facilitate academic conversation through forming relationships with their tutees is an art form, and the tutor's craft is a creative process in and of itself. Artists also push the boundaries of what is acceptable and safe to talk about, and similarly, students who do this exact act of breaking free from their comfort zone make the most progress in their work as writers. Writing centers should not be spaces in which students come to have all their work done for them, but instead a space in which they can grow and flourish as writers and students more broadly. This goal can be achieved by embracing the concept of art in writing and considering that writing associates are artists themselves who create a safe environment for students to push themselves beyond the boundaries of what they previously

thought they could accomplish academically.

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