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Writing Centers: Feminized or Feminist Spaces?

Upon entering the Trinity College Writing Center, the gender imbalance is immediately apparent. Where are all the men? Only 9.4% of students currently employed as a Writing Associate at Trinity College are male (“Writing Center Master Listings Report” 2020). The incoming class of Writing Associates is exclusively female. While these numbers may sound surprising, this gender imbalance is not unique to Trinity. Writing centers found on college and university campuses across the country are similarly staffed disproportionately by women and female students (Spitzer-Hanks 2016). Why is this an academic space so uniquely occupied by women? In order to understand the concentration of women within the writing center, it is important to first understand the history of the writing center and, notably, how this work has been undervalued and misunderstood on college campuses. However, this history can only begin to enlighten the feminization of writing centers. Writing center literature has a tendency to focus narrowly on the center itself, but it is also important to look more broadly at the political and social value system within which the writing center exists. Drawing on feminist scholarship, the ideas of women’s work and women’s morality can be used to contextualize the feminization of the writing center, and how it has been understood “a site where caring education is promoted according to a cultural ideal of ‘women's work’” (Trachsel 1995, 27). The work of the writing center has been devalued because it has been understood as feminine, care-giving work, rather than a highly intellectual and ethical practice of care, which can be practiced by both genders.

Instead of existing as a passive, feminized space, writing centers must assert themselves as an actively feminist site: this means explicitly recognizing care as an intellectual and ethical choice, rather than allowing it to remain an implicit value, conveniently found in female tutors.

A Brief History of Writing Centers

In order to understand how writing centers have come to be “feminized spaces,” it is necessary to understand their history. Writing centers first began to emerge on college campuses in the early 20th century. It is impossible to identify one single impetus for their founding, as there are many different factors and events that ultimately led to the development of writing centers and shaped their final form. The earliest writing centers considered themselves to be an outgrowth of the classroom, rather than a distinct entity (Waller 2002). However, as universities began to recognize writing centers (or clinics, as they were often called at the time) as a useful resource, they urged them to focus on “provid[ing] instruction for the students whose placement themes did not meet departmental standards” (Waller 2002, 4). Beginning in the 1940s, a new focus on proficiency and remediation emerged in the writing center. Historical events were significant in driving this change, as writing centers moved from an emphasis on the classroom and helping writers in general, to specifically supporting remedial work. Particularly significant were “events in the 1930s, World War II, the Civil Rights movement that created affirmative action and open admissions, and the literacy crisis of the 1970s” (Waller 2002, 4). Individuals who had previously been excluded from higher education, including the children of immigrants, veterans, and minorities, were increasingly enrolling at colleges and universities. Met with an influx of underprepared students, universities responded by placing institutional pressure on writing centers, forcing them to focus on remedial work and teaching proficiency skills.

Writing centers have not been fully able to escape the stigmatization resulting from their historical role as a center for remedial learning. Even today, while writing centers have expanded greatly and have gained more respect on college campuses, many still see the center as a “fix-it” shop. In Stephen North’s canonical work “The Idea of a Writing Center,” he bemoans the persistent misunderstanding of the writing center. North describes professors who usher students through the doors so they can get their papers “cleaned up,” and “the occasional student who tosses her paper on our reception desk, announcing that she’ll ‘pick it up in an hour’” (1984, 433). Writing centers have often been viewed as taking on a service role on college campuses, rather than performing real academic work, and the support provided to students through the writing center has long been undervalued by the American academy.

In studying the history of writing centers, an important theme begins to emerge: writing centers have long been marginalized on college campuses. Nancy Grimm reflects on the contested position of the writing center in her article “Rearticulating the Work of the Writing Center”. She notes that “the stories shared among writing center people ring along similar themes—faculty suspicion about what happens in the writing center, refusal to grant departmental voting rights to writing center professional staff, faculty dismay about the conditions of papers that “went through’ the writing center,” and so on (Grimm 1996, 523). The institution of higher education has struggled to understand where the writing center fits in. Is it an extension of the classroom? Are students really learning in the writing center, or just getting a paper cleaned up? As Stephen North said, and has often been quoted, “the job of the writing center is to produce better writers, not better writing” (1984, 438). The practice of teaching writing may take many different forms. Sometimes, this means reviewing grammar rules. Sometimes, this means drafting an outline, crafting a thesis, or discussing sources. Whatever the

focus of the individual session, the ultimate goal of the writing tutor is to support the long term growth and development of the writer. Such work requires emotional, creative, and analytical intelligence. The writing center is a unique resource for students on college campuses, as it presents an opportunity to learn writing in a one-on-one environment which can cater to their specific academic needs. However, because this resource is so unique in a college environment, it has been frequently misunderstood. The confusion over writing center work has marginalized the space on university campuses. This historical relationship between the writing center and the university as a whole begins to enlighten the feminization of this space.

Women's Work and Morality

The writing center does not exist as a single, independent entity that is removed from or unaffected by society. Thus, a broad socio-political perspective on women's work and morality is necessary for contextualizing the gender composition of the writing center. The concentration of women in the writing center is not a mere coincidence, nor can it be explained away by a weak argument that women are simply predisposed for such work. "The term "gendered" when applied to the role of writing centers in the academy seems to invite an essentialist definition: writing centers are sites where women are concentrated in the academic labor force" (Trachsel 1995, 27). However, this understanding is far too simplistic. By drawing on feminist scholars, it is possible to situate the writing center as an important unit of analysis within a much larger conversation on the female position within society, and how certain spaces and behaviors have been constructed as feminine. Feminist scholarship lends insight into the specific ways in which the work done in the writing center is stigmatized and feminized.

In order to accurately address the gender imbalance in the writing center, it is necessary to further understand how exactly work in the writing center has been devalued as a form of “women’s work”. “Women’s work,” a pejorative term, refers to the undervalued labor that society expects of women: scrubbing, dusting, diapering, washing, feeding, ironing, and so on. This endless list of duties underscores one powerful idea: women care for those around them, they calm and nurture and support. Women’s work differs significantly from “real” work in several ways. First, it is often unpaid. This is, in part, because such work is seen as naturally resulting from the female disposition and so-called female morality, rather than being work that is actively pursued. Women’s work, such as housework, often goes unrecognized as real work within our capitalist system. Rather than being seen as a valuable pursuit, it is perceived as behavior that is inherent in womanhood. Unlike other forms of labor, women are considered to be born into their work, and begin learning this trade (wife, mother, caregiver) in girlhood.

In “Wages Against Housework,” radical feminist thinker Silvia Federici seeks to denaturalize housework and recognize it as a productive form of labor. Federici argues that women are exploited for free labor within the home and presents a highly provocative demand: women should be paid to do housework. By paying women wages for their housework, it would be recognized as valuable and productive labor in our society. Furthermore, this work would be denaturalized. As Federici says, “we want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what love is” (6). If housework is recognized as a form of paid labor, it will be integrated into our economic system and detached from notions of feminine purpose. It is unclear to what degree Silvia Federici truly seeks to present wages as a realistic policy goal and to what extent this is really a provocation, demanding critical reflection on the state of women in our society. To some degree, she does both. Regardless of her exact goal, Federici’s argument

enlightens the ways in which women's work is undervalued in society, and how deeply problematic this is. When certain forms of work are viewed as inherently female, they are excluded from society as a whole.

The devaluation of women's work has contributed to the stigmatization of care, particularly within a patriarchal society that so prioritizes autonomy and independence. While American society claims to value compassion, responsibility, and nurturance, these ideas are associated with the private lives of women and rarely taken into public consideration. Joan Tronto argues that a care ethic must be disassociated from this idea of "women's morality" and instead needs to be understood in a broader context. "The term [women's morality] refers loosely to a collection of ideas: values placed on caring and nurturance, the importance of mothers love, a stress on the value of sustaining women's relationships, the overriding value of peace" (Tronto 1993, 1). These so-called female values are enticing in our American society that stresses "an unlimited concern with productivity and progress" (Tronto 1993, 2). Yet, despite this appeal, women have been excluded from political, economic, and cultural power. Our society has confined a certain set of values to the spaces that women are allowed to occupy, arguing that these values are harmful, or at the very least, unuseful and unproductive, elsewhere.

A deeper look at American social and political ideals reveals that a misunderstanding of independence and autonomy has contributed to the stigmatization of care in our society. America is a highly individualistic society, valuing independence, liberty, and the idea of the self-made man. Influential political theorists such as Smith and Rousseau have condemned dependency, but "they have done so because of their peculiar view of dependency. Rather than viewing dependency as a natural part of the human experience, political theorists emphasize dependence as the character-destroying condition" (Tronto 1993, 163). An acute fear of dependency has

relegated care to the domestic sphere and women's work. However, Tronto argues that "the conception of the rational autonomous man has been a fiction constructed to fit with liberal theories" (162). Dependence in our society is incredibly stigmatized: the single-mother receiving welfare is uniquely despised. However, dependence is not inherently corruptive, it is a fact of life. At certain points throughout life, we will all depend on others or be depended on by others. Tronto posits that the human condition can best be understood as interdependent. Receiving care should not be stigmatized, and neither should giving care. The conflict between so-called women's morality and the American ideals of autonomy and independence, demonstrates the need for a new understanding of care.

Caring should not be understood as a lesser form of work, for it is a choice that we all can make—a choice that has the potential to enrich our personal, professional, and academic lives. Reconceptualizing care in this manner has profound implications for the writing center, because care can be identified as an important pedagogical practice, rather than simply a feminine attribute, or a stigmatized form of care that undermines academic success. Writing does not have to be an entirely solitary pursuit, nor should it be, as written work is greatly improved through peer review and critique. For certain students, such as those with different linguistic or cultural backgrounds, or learning differences, the support of a writing tutor can be especially powerful. Receiving support with writing should not be seen as an indicator of weakness, a threatening degree of dependency, or the inability to succeed in our individualistic society. The need for care in the writing center is not the issue. The real issue is this: care has been treated as something that is valued and practiced by women, specifically, rather than being acknowledged as a universally valuable action. The writing center is but a microcosm of our society, for both the

feminization and stigmatization of writing centers ultimately result from a deep misunderstanding and devaluing of care.

Moving Forward: Beyond a Feminized Space

I return once more to my first question, *where all are the men in the writing center?* An answer, though not a simple one, has begun to take form. Misogynistic values have stigmatized care and associated it with domestic womanhood, rather than recognizing it as an important part of learning and academia. This has led to the social construction of the writing center as a feminine space, where it is viewed to be carrying out “something like the domestic, care-giving service of the academic community” (Trachsel 1995, 27). Put simply, the writing center is seen as a place for women. This idea has shaped writing centers in many ways, but most obviously in the hiring practice. Lisa Birnbaum, at the University of Tampa, was one of many writing center directors to note the gender imbalance in her staff and investigate its cause.

[Birnbaum] was told by a faculty member that her memo soliciting the names of prospective peer tutors prompted him to recommend women rather than men partly because he ‘sees tutors in the writing center as female’, but also because the memo listed qualities that described a feminine “nurturing type” of individual as the ideal tutor: empathy, patience, sensitivity, diplomacy, friendliness, intuition, supportiveness, responsiveness, and care-giving. (Trachsel 1995, 6)

Sharing writing can be a very vulnerable and challenging experience. In addition to being excellent students and talented writers, it is also incredibly important that writing tutors are empathetic, patient, and sensitive. Each of the qualities listed in the University of Tampa memo is highly valuable in the writing center. Each of these qualities is also seen as a natural feminine

attribute. The response that Birnbaum elicited from a faculty member reaffirms the constructedness of gender in the writing center—the writing center is filled with women, not men, because *this is how we think it should be*.

What should writing centers make of this information? Should writing centers change their hiring practices? Is the concentration of women in the writing center a real concern? Writing centers offer invaluable work experience for the undergraduate and graduate students who work there. Some might argue, and reasonably enough, that the concentration of women in writing centers is a good thing. Higher education is no longer a predominantly masculine space in a quantitative sense, however the institution remains deeply patriarchal. “While women (as of 2000) earned 44% of the doctoral degrees in the United States, they only represent[ed] 25% of full-time faculty at research institutions” (Conklin & Robbins-McNeish, 2006). The writing center is an academic space that is uniquely welcoming to young women, providing an opportunity to work in an academic environment, alongside other intelligent young women. Having graduated from an all girls high school myself, I know firsthand how empowering it can be to work and learn in such a space. Furthermore, writing center jobs could be particularly beneficial for young women and their future careers, as women are statistically less likely to fill other leadership roles due to widespread misogyny and discrimination. Certainly, the concentration of women in the writing center is not inherently “bad”. However, that does not mean it is necessarily a good thing, for this gender imbalance ultimately stems from patriarchal ideals. Rather than pursuing a superficial solution, like hiring fewer women, or putting a quota in place for male hires, it is important that writing centers think deeply about the implications of the gender imbalance within their space.

Writing centers must assert themselves as activist, feminist spaces on college campuses, rather than existing as a passive, feminized site. In this usage, feminized means to be coded as pertaining to women, and it is both a qualitative and quantitative statement (Spitzer-Hanks 2016). Broader social and political forces have worked with and through the institution of the university to feminize the writing center, promoting the damaging idea that it is a place for women's work. In the midst of such ideas, the writing center should not fall into the trap of existing passively. In "Nurturant Ethics and Academic Ideals: Convergence in the Writing Center," Mary Trachsel urges writing centers to reject the passivity inherent in the concept of feminization.

[To be feminized] is to be disempowered within the patriarchy, to be the object of systemic oppression. But the dangers in accepting victim status are readily apparent.

Embracing this version of femininity as a defining component of our own professional identity generates disabling energy in the form of anger, bitterness, and shame. (Trachsel 1995, 26)

The writing center should not passively accept its feminization. The version of shameful, bashful femininity that Trachsel describes, will only further marginalize the writing center and devalue its work. By drawing on feminist scholars such as Federici and Tronto, we can cultivate a political consciousness within the writing center, which can counter a narrative of passive femininity. Writing centers should assert themselves as a site for feminist activism, which means denaturalizing women's care work and recognizing the intellectual and ethical value of practicing care in the writing center. Care should explicitly be identified as a part of the writing center pedagogy, something that can be taught and chosen, rather than an attribute that is pleasantly and conveniently found in female tutors. All tutors, not only female tutors, should know that they were selected because of their empathy and intuition, in addition to their intelligence and writing

ability. Instead of allowing care to be an implicit value, it should be directly emphasized in tutor training, through readings and conversation. Tutors must be actively encouraged to practice care in every session, and recognize that this an important part of their job, rather than

In “Wages Against Housework,” Federici argued that a paid wage would denaturalize women’s housework by recognizing it as an economically valuable pursuit, rather than the manifestation of a female desire to care. By paying (often female) tutors to practice caring as a valuable part of writing center pedagogy, we can begin to denaturalize and destigmatize care, both within the writing center and society a whole. The writing center has powerful potential as a feminist activist space: writing centers can empower women as empathetic intellectuals in their tutoring practice and also recognize caring as a valuable and employable skill in an academic environment.

Writing centers have long been misunderstood as providing feminine, care-giving work, rather than practicing a highly intellectual and ethical form of care. Feminist scholarship enlightens the stigmatization of writing center work, for caring has traditionally been viewed as feminine, and women’s work has always been devalued in our society. Moving forward, writing centers must refuse to be identified as a passive, feminized site. Instead, writing centers must assert themselves as a site for feminist activism, where female employees are not valued because of their natural inclination to care and nurture, but rather because they have demonstrated their emotional and analytical intelligence. Through tutor training and hiring practices, caring must be explicitly identified as a part of writing center pedagogy, rather than being an attribute that is conveniently found in women.

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