

Feminist Tutoring in the Writing Center

By Andrew Rihn

Critical self-reflection is a necessary part of the tutor's job. Not only must we consider our personal interactions and attitudes during tutorials, but we also have to think about the perceptions and conduct associated with the writing center itself. Through this self-reflection, many scholars have discovered that gender plays an important role in the work of the writing center, while others have found the writing center to be a gendered space.

In terms of gender identity, Mary Traschel has stated that the Writing Center is often perceived as feminine. In her research, she argues that "writing centers are often socially constructed as feminine sites where something like the domestic, care-giving service of the academy is carried out, and this may be true regardless of whether the work is undertaken by women or by men" (26). This process of social construction often occurs through the use of language. For example, some metaphors used to describe the center's work, such as "care-giving," "midwifery," and "nurturing," extend this gendered identity. These common descriptors carry particular connotations that serve to designate a space of femininity, for better or for worse.

Unfortunately, because of sexism and gender inequality, perceptions of femininity often lead to perceptions of marginalized status in our society. In this regard, Traschel points out the conflicted status of nurturing in the writing center; coded as feminine, it is often marginalized because of the tendency to negatively value non-masculine characteristics. Traschel also recognizes that sexist attitudes in the University can devalue the nurturing work of the writing center. Still, she finds strength in this role, identifying "caring not as an instinctive and purely emotion-powered response to young or otherwise vulnerable others, but as an intellectual and ethical choice" (26). In order to place value on these perceptions of femininity, and to spread gender awareness in general, Traschel believes we should undertake feminist empowerment through our own conscious decisions and practices.

The task becomes how to change a passive feminine image into a more active feminist one. To achieve this goal, tutors may have to move beyond the usual practices of the writing center. This may include questioning a tutee's position when a paper is full of sexist comments. Likewise, creating a dialogue about code-switching within classrooms, or even questioning the foundation of a student's paper, are other possible ways to practice feminism. Whenever sexism crops up in a student's paper, whether intentionally or not, we should take that active role and speak up. If we see sexist behavior from a professor or in University policy, we should address it. Although this may not immediately win the tutor friends, I believe it is still in the best interest of our peers. Besides, as tutors our job is to talk about things; to remain silent in the face of sexist oppression would go against so much of our training. Finally, although we may not want to simply tell a student what is right or wrong, we can certainly ask

questions about gender that will make the student think. These kinds of questions may move beyond the scope of the individual paper and hopefully keep the student thinking long after the session is over.

Though these practices can lead to empowerment, the feminist tutor still faces many challenges along the way. One risks veering the tutorial too far off course from the actual writing. Then there is the possibility of becoming too directive or confrontational with a student. A tutor must also contend with the wishes and expectations of the tutee. Very few students come into a writing center looking for a discussion of gender politics and its relation to the academy, let alone the real world. More likely they want just enough help to pass a course. If the tutees feel they are not getting the help they need, or at least the help they expect, they will not return. This student resistance can have a silencing effect on feminist tutors.

There is also the matter of slipping back, of actually reaffirming the anti-feminist beliefs which the tutor wished to oppose. In her article titled "A Delicate Balance: Employing Feminist Process Goals in Writing Center Consulting," tutor Gabrielle Seeley reflects on her own experiences, reminding us that we must always watch for traps; otherwise, despite even the best intentions, "the session may serve the patriarchal goals of the university" (par. 4). To avoid the reinforcement of patriarchy in our tutorials, we have to rely on feminist scholarship, then try out feminist practices to see which strategies work and which ones don't. After all, there are few end-all, be-all models for feminist tutoring. And, more than likely, any attempt to create one would be inadequate. For a model to hold true, one has to assume that any two sessions are more than similar. This would simplify the work we do - work we know to be unique, creative, and complex. As feminist tutors, we must remain aware of the real-world techniques that work for us, and be ready and willing to share these practices with other tutors if we are to be effective.

Despite these concerns, tutors should continue towards feminist ends. By understanding the writing center not only as a gendered educational institution, but also as a site for gendered politics, I think our knowledge about exactly how and why the writing center works the way it does it greatly enhanced. By better understanding the feminist potential of writing center work, tutors can become more conscientious of the roles they inhabit and enhance their ability for critical self-reflection. This leads to an improvement in the actual tutoring process and ultimately helps the writing center to become an explicitly anti-sexist space within the university.