

Setting the Scene: Imagery and Student Voice in the Writing Center

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When students use the writing center as a scenic route to better grades, they may find more than just pretty pictures and inspiring words on the walls. Writing centers can make students' scenic routes more meaningful than other, more traditional spaces of student learning. Though some centers appear to be "designed around furnishings and technologies, rather than what clients will actually be doing," the furnishings and technologies of the center can have a large (albeit subconscious) impact on the rhetorical work student-writers do in and outside of the writing center (Inman 20). While we hear of studies done on how particular color schemes may affect student learning, we may not be going far enough by simply painting our walls inspiring colors. Writing centers need to embrace a multicultural décor that allows students to see minority literacies in action within the larger society.

Many writing centers draw on the "home-style," middle class, Anglo-American-style décor Jackie Grutsch McKinney deconstructs in "Leaving Home Sweet Home: Towards Critical Readings of Writing Center Spaces." McKinney describes the home-like atmosphere as including coffee pots, couches, and other common middle-class household items (6-8). For writing centers to become spaces that reflect our students' literacies, we can embrace new designs while attempting to embody the premise of the Conference on College Composition and Communication's resolution "Students' Right to Their Own Language." Because our campuses are ever diversifying, a home-sweet-home

approach cannot be counted on to help our students feel comfortable or suggest the important rhetorical work that needs to be done in support of minority students.

Using the CCCC resolution as a guide, writing centers can re-design their spaces by taking into account the tension between students' languages and the language of the academy. If we want the students who enter our centers to take up their languages, to declare that their literacies are valid, then the writing center can no longer be seen only as a means to better grades. Rather, the center must be an interesting, invigorating scenic route toward better writing where students pull off onto the side of the road, look at the view, and have an epiphany.

Some centers I've worked in have attempted to embrace multiple literacies by incorporating multiethnic artwork and portraits in their communal spaces. Others have incorporated posters and artwork of various minority groups into their interior design schemes or give well-known minority writers and theorists prominent space on their walls: faces gracing their walls might be as (un)familiar as Frederick Douglas, Geneva Smitherman, Sandra Cisneros, Sherman Alexi, and Maxine Hong Kingston.

The idea for this type of multicultural décor is that, by frequently and literally seeing their literacies being valued in university settings, students are encouraged to negotiate a variety of literacy practices within university settings. The basic understanding of this concept arises out of ideological models of literacy, such as that proposed by Brian Street in *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Street defines an ideological model of literacy as embracing multiple literacies and understanding literacy skills within particular contexts. For example, our students engage multiple literacies while using various technologies or communicating with others at home, in work environments, high

schools, and neighborhoods. They negotiate these literacies regularly. At home, students may speak Spanish with their families, but they come to campus and speak English. Our students text each other throughout the day, and then go to their writing intensive classes where words must be spelt out and strung together more formally. The center can help students learn to consciously negotiate these literacies, but not through design alone.

Seeing pictures of Douglas, Smitherman, and Cisneros won't cause an epiphany moment. Centers need more involved representations of our students, edifying quotations from the heroes we post on our walls, contextual representations of their struggles against dominant social groups and language/literacy patterns, and images of students and non-students using language effectively in mixed contexts.

We need writing center staff who are excited to bring these literacy role models into focus for student writers. Students should be encouraged to work their own literacy practices into their writing—for emphasis but also to demonstrate literate validity in the eyes of the academy. Beatrice Mendez Newman suggests that for borderlands students, a “mix of cultures seems to work politically, socially, and economically” (254). She speaks of encouraging the tutors working under her to handle multicultural writers differently when the dominant culture did not align with their personal cultures and cultural expectations, but in her discussion, she suggests focusing on academic competency (256).

Instead, imagine a conference where the tutor sees a writer using her (non-academic) home language. The tutor brings the writer to a wall where pictures of protesters demonstrate the power of home languages on successful picket lines. Then, she shows the writer a painting of Sojourner Truth giving her famous “Ain't I a Woman?” speech. The writer sees a nearby image of a local poetry slam and remembers the use of

home languages that left audience members passionate for change. They sit down on a sofa and chat about words and context working together.

The writer and tutor talk about Facebook and Psych 101. They talk about political fliers and podcasts. They reference the snapshots, posters, and paintings on the walls, thinking about the language choices each represents and invokes. In the end, the writer struggles to revise her piece for Psych 101, but she knows how to use the research to make a statement addressed to her home language users on her blog later that night.

The décor isn't the only thing that makes writers (un)comfortable. A décor that gives lip service to inspiring historical figures adds to McKinney's middle-class, homey environment. The intentions are good, but they don't inspire epiphany. The change comes when tutors use the space and décor to help writers understand complex rhetorical negotiations.

Works Cited

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