

Everything I Always Wanted to Know, but Learned From Bob Marley

By Christina Jordan, Penn State University

My fondest memory of English 250, the semester-long training class that each writing tutor must take at Penn State, is of the time that my director Jon Olson came to class with a poster of Bob Marley, a framed picture of the Dahli Llama, and some George Clinton lyrics. Talking about something he called a “pedagogy of kindness,” Jon quoted all three cultural icons. I sat back and listened. I soaked it all in. And I chuckled to myself. I wondered how anyone could talk seriously about P Funk and collaborative learning in the same sentence. I concluded that Jon must be off his gourd.

Bob, George, and a monk: it was like a bad joke waiting to happen. *So Bob Marley, George Clinton, and The Dahli Llama walk into the Writing Center ...* I, in my infinitely wise college freshman ways, just could not see what these men would have to do with my career as a writing tutor. It was all too absurd.

But my hubris has since completely dissipated, and now, as a senior on my way out of Penn State, I recognize exactly how I have participated in a pedagogy of kindness—the kind that Jon’s three favorite writing center icons represent.

If you were to ask me how being a writing tutor has impacted my life, I would tell you without hesitation that it has made me a kinder, more understanding human being. Not that I was a curmudgeon before I ever stepped foot in the Undergraduate Writing Center, but since that semi-magical “eureka!” moment (or perhaps it was a set of moments?) when I finally understood what it meant to be a participant in an environment where collaborative learning thrives, I have noticed that I am a better person.

I’ve learned a few things in my time at the beloved WC, and in the spirit of self-reflection that this environment encourages, I’d like to share some life lessons that have made me over into a kinder, gentler version of myself:

WC Life Lesson #1: A friendly smile goes a long way.

I’m a former wallflower, so I’m intimately familiar with what it feels like to be uncomfortable in your environment or to be afraid to talk to other people. I was, in fact, extremely uncomfortable at my first few Writing Center staff meetings because of my shyness. I didn’t talk to too many people, just kind of sat quietly and listened to what was going on. I almost thought about quitting the Center because I didn’t feel any particular attachment to the group.

I eventually got over my fear of talking though and when I became a peer tutor coordinator, I made it my mission to make everyone feel welcome. I didn’t want anyone to sit at staff meetings feeling lonely like I’d been. Now I like to get to know everyone’s name and make sure I say a quick “hey” to all the tutors I run into. I know that when I

started to make tutor friends, it was just the simple interactions between us that made all the difference in how I felt about our community.

The same principles have made my tutoring sessions more productive. Sure, people come to the Center to get writing help, but it's always nice to take a second before you start tutoring to ask someone how they're doing. People really appreciate genuine concern; it makes them feel at ease and shows that you care. So if there's one important thing I've learned from my time at the WC, it's that everyone appreciates a friendly smile and a little kindness.

WC Life Lesson #2: If you can't say something nice . . . then you're crazy.

When I was in English 250, we spent a lot of time talking about the importance of being positive while tutoring. We talked about how a lot of students have "red pen" syndrome and how getting some positive criticism can really help their self-esteem as writers.

I've had the opportunity to witness first-hand how positive praise in a session can really improve a writer's attitude about himself. If I had a dime for every time someone sat down next to me, threw a paper on the table, and said, "I'm a bad writer," I could probably buy a pretty nice steak dinner. Like I learned in 250, everyone has an inner writer, and sometimes it just takes a little coaxing and practice to let that capable, confident writer out. After all, writing is just communicating. And everyone can do that. So when a person tells me, "I'm a bad writer," I say, "Nonsense! There's no such thing as a bad writer." Granted, a lot of my tutees look at me like I'm BS-ing when I say this, but I think they eventually come to believe me because as I continue a session, I'm careful to point out all the good things they do. The phrase, "I like the way you . . ." tends to come out of my mouth quite a bit.

The lesson of positive praise has translated into an attitude change in everyday life for me. Just as I can always point out something good in a paper, I find that there's always something nice that can be said in every situation. In fact, I have a really hard time being critical of anyone now. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I'm a Pollyanna, but because I'm so aware of how the things I say affect a writer's confidence in a session, I can't help but be more conscious of the things I say in any situation.

I treat life as though it were a tutoring session. Even when I could get into an argument, I'm careful to phrase things as I might in a session. For example, I may say, "I wonder if you've accidentally been eating my food, roommate." I've come to the conclusion that I can always say things nicely.

WC Life Lesson #3: Space is definitely the place.

My Writing Center used to have four walls. As of last semester, it has three. You wouldn't think that you could get attached to a wall. What is a wall anyway? It's just one big rock, right? But I *did* get attached. When administration decided that they wanted to take down a wall and unite the Math and Writing Centers at Penn State, it

made me a bit angry. Writing Centers are supposed to be intimate, safe places where people can feel comfortable coming, I thought. But when I looked around at the newer, more vacuous space, I felt the comfort level was in jeopardy. I glanced at the Math Center side of the room, feeling a bit territorial. The Math Center wasn't as jazzy-looking as the Writing Center, and I had decided that its sterile-looking environment would have a negative impact on the writing space. I wasn't alone in my attitude, either. At one point, the tension between math and writing tutors was so strong, it felt like we were the Hatfields and McCoys.

Things have calmed down quite a bit though since the original shock of wall-lessness wore off. In an effort to improve writing tutor-math tutor relations, a group of writing tutors invited the math tutors to participate in a makeover of the new, shared space. While none of the math tutors actually responded to the request, I think the gesture of asking may have served as an olive branch. Now we peacefully coexist.

And I and the rest of my friends who were concerned about keeping the space comfortable, have also been eased by the makeover we've completed. Since the wall went down, we've added plants, Christmas lights, a book shelf, a couch, and a colorful new bulletin board to our space. We've become more aware of how the physical environment in which we tutor affects our attitudes, and that's a life lesson that I think we'll all carry with us. For me, an added bonus of the wall-less experience is that I've learned a little more about flexibility. When I could have continued to be angry and done something stupid like rally to put the wall back up, I used my energy to think about how to improve the shared space instead.

So like Tom Petty said, "even walls fall down," and even I can learn to be more open to new possibilities.

WC Life Lesson #4: Not everyone has read Bruffee.

I'm in a speech class this semester that requires each student to write an evaluation of someone else's speech. There's a specific evaluation form the students have to use, and it lists a number of areas to pay attention to as well as the instructions, "make a critical comment about each area." A few weeks ago, I received one of these peer evaluations that really upset me. Someone had made a negative comment about every single aspect of my speech. As my brain swirled in anger, I seethed to myself, "I cannot believe this person couldn't find one nice thing to say! Doesn't he know that 'critical' doesn't necessarily mean negative! I should walk over there and tell him!"

Luckily I didn't walk up to said evaluator and tell him what I thought. I imagine that my anger wouldn't have let me come across too nicely and the result probably wouldn't have been too productive. Instead, I let myself cool off and came to the conclusion that I couldn't really be mad at this guy. After all, he didn't go through a tutor training class. He's probably never been informed about the value of positive praise. And it's probably a safe bet that he's never read Bruffee's chapter on constructive reading and how to respond to one's peers thoroughly but helpfully.

As I thought more about why I got so mad at this classmate, I thought about all the first-time tutees who come see me at the WC. On any given day, there's always a handful of people who come in, sit down, and go, "I just want you to edit this." I don't edit papers. I tutor people. But it never makes me mad when people don't understand my philosophy. They simply don't know it. So to remedy the situation, I kindly give my spiel which goes something like this, "I see from your forms that you've never been to the Writing Center before, so let me just explain a little bit about what we do. We usually . . ." And once I get done explaining why I don't write on a person's paper, why I read out loud, and why we focus on the areas the writer wants to pay attention to, my tutees are usually pretty happy to get involved in the collaborative learning.

I realize that as I go through life, there are going to be many more situations where my expectations differ from other people's. I approach the world like it's one big Writing Center, but not everyone else subscribes to this kind of philosophy. There are going to be many times when my world clashes with other people's and I'm just going to have to accept that these situations will come up, and show other people (what I think is) the best way to handle these situations by my own example.

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The tutor training may have been over after I finished English 250, but the life training I've received as a result of tutoring has never stopped. Through all my WC experiences, I've come away with the knowledge that everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt and that we all have something to learn from each other. That is how I've come to interpret Jon's pedagogy of kindness.

When I leave college, I will look back on my experiences at the Writing Center as the experiences that taught me the most. For me, the world isn't my oyster. It's one big tutoring session.