Shaping Writers in the Center: How Identity is Acknowledged and Influenced

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When examining writing center pedagogy and teaching composition practices within the center, it is necessary for consultants to focus on employing practices that are tailored to each specific session. I analyzed scholarship and my own experience working in the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s (UHM) Writing Center to unravel the complexity of identity politics and how they are influenced by tutor/writer relationship and binary structures that exist within modern writing centers. Research has shown that claiming identity as a writer is what sits on the forefront of identity politics, but certain tutoring strategies can privilege certain groups when employed within the center. When examined and critiqued together, scholarship demonstrates the controversy about identity politics and binaries in writing center settings. Analyzing the tutoring practices of consultants in UHM’s center when working with native English and second language students, however, explains how different factors come together to encourage positive identity practices within sessions.

I started my exploration of writing center pedagogy with a background as a journalist; I have a mindset that puts great emphasis on the identity of the people that I work with and how their personal story shapes their writing. Identity is a central theme in writing center literature because of the inherent commitment of centers to strive for an all-inclusive attitude towards writers. During my course of study, I analyzed scholarship, political movements, and the tutoring practices of myself and other consultants to critique the concept of identity politics and how it manifests in writing center pedagogy. While the practice of privileging multiple identities is stressed in most centers, strategies that involve changing tutoring practices to fit in established binaries can favor certain categories of writers, and thus, these binaries can subvert practices within the center that support multiple identities. Through observation of tutoring practices, however, I will examine the role that binaries actually hold in the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Writing Center, and how sessions that foreground identity politics can be shaped around them.

I am currently going into my junior year majoring in Economics, Finance, and Psychology, with plans to attend law school after completing my undergraduate degree. This work was done for Dr. Georganne Nordstrom’s Teaching Composition class, which focused on writing center pedagogy and allowed me to use the scholarship that I read to influence our own tutoring practices as consultants at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa’s Writing Center. *Shaping Writers in the Center* was written because I’ve always found writing to be an essential outlet to express identity, and the piece allowed me to reflect on how my own experiences in the Center related to the construction of writer identity.
Defining Identity

The phrase “identity” is used throughout the paper to refer to both the identity that can be found in the actual writing, thoughts, and ideas worked on in sessions, as well as the cultivation and comfort of the writer’s own identity being expressed in the center. The definition follows Harry Denny’s concept of identity as explained in “Queering the Writing Center,” where he notes that most writing centers focus on promoting powerful identity practices by working to transform the center into a safe space in which multiple identities can feel included (Denny, 2011). Promoting powerful identity practices within the center, however, is hard to do without a deeper understanding of what makes up one’s identity. Referencing specific types of writing such as personal narratives, where identity plays a dominant role, Denny argues that “the bodies attached to those narratives and critical projects often lack interrogation and understanding, in spite of the warm embrace and supportive environment that is cultivated” in the writing center, and he follows up with one of the most important questions we engage with as writing center practitioners: “What does it mean to claim identity as a writer?” (p. 264). This specific question sits at the forefront of identity politics in composition studies, and led me to try to figure out what identity truly means and how we can employ identity politics within the center in order to promote inclusion.

Writing as Personal Work

In his important work, Denny questions how writer identity is claimed, which leads to the necessity of a discussion of how much influence tutors can have on affecting writer identity. Concerns about tutor influence can happen in almost all genres of writing, but are especially prevalent when consulting on personal narratives. Personal narratives are a genre of writing that requires writers to draw on their own voices and experiences throughout the piece, and scholarship has examined the effect of writing consultations in the personal narrative process through case studies and practices. Alyssa Quinn (2016) details her experience as a writing consultant working with a student on a personal narrative, describing personal narratives as a student’s “sacred text.” Quinn argues that tutor/writing relationships can drastically impact the identity expressed in a piece, and selective cases can happen where false identities are created if the tutor prematurely or erroneously interprets a writer’s implied meaning. Quinn discusses her struggle with working on personal narratives, stating that a trap tutors can fall into is pushing “a specific interpretation on [the] student’s experience, although it was clearly not the interpretation that rang true,” going on to make the point that “[a]s tutors, we are in the position to strongly influence student’s writing, and never is that a more risky position to be in then when dealing with personal narratives” (p. 26). Quinn notes that encouraging the writer to claim their own identity in personal narratives is difficult, especially because writers are vulnerable to being influenced by what the tutor believes is a possible or right interpretation of their own experience.

The question of claiming identity is further unraveled by looking at Anne DiPardo’s (2011) “Whispers of Coming and Going: Lessons from Fannie.” This popularized case study explores the tutor/writer relationship between Morgan and Fannie, a Navajo student, specifically focusing on the hardship that Fannie faced when writing school assignments. Fannie is a L+ learner, meaning that she is currently learning or has learned a language that’s not a native or first language to her. Fannie was successful in demonstrating a strong version of identity in her personal narratives; however, that was challenged by the feedback she was getting from her instructor which strictly focused on expanding ideas with details and overt sophistication, which led Fannie to believe that even when she was clearly demonstrating notable skill in expressing her own identity, her writing was still seen to be of inferior quality. DiPardo points out multiple times throughout the piece that her instructor was worried that Fannie possessed a “lack of sophistication” that would leave her underprepared for upper-level writing in the school setting (p. 239). It seemed also that many of the positive comments that Fannie got on her work were vague and hard to grasp, and DiPardo questions the comment of “good” on one of Fannie’s papers because it appeared as if this “opening praise only intended to soften the criticism that followed” (p. 238). The idea of what would have made the work more sophisticated remained unexplained to Fannie, and it was concluded in the literature that writing is susceptible to being discounted based on specific structural requirements that are privileged in academia, which in turn affects students’ ability to claim an identity in the academic setting.
Tutor/Writer Relationship

A significant difficulty in generating a personal style, as scholarship points out, seems to be how the relationship between the tutor and writer impacts the identity found in writing. Steven Corbett (2011) addresses a particular concept in DiPardo’s piece and speculates that, as the tutor working with Fannie, Morgan’s “repeated attempts to prod and push Fannie toward what Morgan believed was realization or progress only pushed Fannie away from any productive insights” (p. 152). Other writing center scholarship addresses these practices as well, pointing out that it is difficult to understand what will constitute a productive tutoring session and where the line is drawn in terms of the tutor pushing their own impressions on the work and where it should go. Referring to personal narratives, Quinn closes her piece by stating that when it comes to personal work, such as in the case of the writing Fannie was trying to produce, “it’s imperative that tutors understand how to help students make meaning of their lives without encountering the pitfall I did and assigning the meaning themselves” (p. 27). Concerns with misconstrued or forced identity is not uncommon, and it has led scholarship to turn to how structures of tutoring sessions play a role in how well a writer is allowed to express their own identity through their writing. This sense of forced identity does not just mean that the tutors can project specific interpretations onto the writer’s work; it can also reference the tutor’s prescriptive, albeit well-intentioned, thoughts on how writing should proceed or look.

Binaries in the Center

I use the term “binary” to refer to a strategy in writing center pedagogy that classifies writers and tutoring styles into specific categories that serve as a tool on how to arrange sessions. For example, consultants sometimes refer to sessions as being directive or nondirective. Directive tutoring usually points to more hands-on strategies in the tutoring session, while nondirective tutoring is supposed to have the consultant be as hands off as possible, focusing on writer only led sessions. Binaries are found throughout writing center scholarship, manifesting especially in works that focus on writer identity or power and authority within the center. Often when we look at the categorization of writers in the tutor/writer relationship, judgment on what kind of sessions is happening is dependent on a perception of power or authority that one person has over the other. Denny takes on the idea that because writing center pedagogy is largely “overflowing with structured binaries…negotiations of which side is privileged and which are illegitimate are ubiquitous in sessions” (p. 256). It can be concluded that binaries harm writing centers and, subsequently, their sessions in terms of promoting identity.

Peter Carino’s (2011) piece “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring” focuses on the binary aspect of peer tutoring and claims that in the directive versus nondirective argument, “the watchword in tutor training should not be nondirective peership, but flexibility,” justifying his “sliding scale” suggestion of when to use the two types of methods depending on how much knowledge the tutor and the writer have on the topic being written about (p. 124). More tutor knowledge and less student knowledge lends itself to more directive methods, and vice versa. This sliding scale advocated by Carino does promote flexibility; however, it makes the claim that there is a certain amount of power and authority set in every session and disregards the idea that both writer and tutor can have equal amounts of power, something that’s argued in more reformist bodies of work like Denny’s. The differences in the scholarship show a large disparity in views among writing center researchers when arguing how binaries in the writing center can help tutors make sessions more effective, but that sense of “effectiveness” can draw tutors to wanting to find meaning in writers’ work that may not be there. Peter Vandenberg (2011) does offer a point for thinking, noting, “until we find ways to transcend the binary thinking…our best effort to counter its hegemonic potential is to explore the possibility that two constructs can be ‘opposed’ only if they are already interrelated” (p. 84). The idea of related binaries seems to serve as a point of agreement between the works of Denny, Carino, and Vandenberg because it shows understanding of the way that the ideas tie together to form writing center praxis that is interrelated, even if it’s often presented as different tutoring styles.

Categorization of Writers in Sessions

During my time as a consultant, I kept a journal where I reflected on the sessions that I had and what I learned from them. In my journals, I noted the frequency at
which I categorize writers without even noticing, but through observation found that these categories did not necessarily affect my tutoring practices. In my very first entry, I wrote that the writer “seems like a native Japanese speaker,” and throughout the rest of the entries on subsequent sessions I noted if I thought the writer was not a native English speaker (January 26, 2017). When I read through the rest of the journal entries on sessions I had, however, I did not notice any specific patterns in my tutoring practices that related to my immediate classifications of whether the writer was a native English speaker or a L+ learner. I would start off most of my sessions with asking the writer if they had any specific aspects of the assignment that they wanted to primarily focus on during the session, and I observed that writers that I noted as either L+ or native English speakers would often point out grammar or proofreading as the concept they wanted to work on. I conclude from my observations that while it might be easy to immediately classify the people that come into the center, their native language played a somewhat insignificant role as to how I organized most of my tutoring sessions. I did find, though, that there was a correlation to how I slipped into different binary tutoring practices, such as directive and nondirective, based on the amount of confidence the writer showed during the session that could point to how important confidence in writer identity and confidence in a writer’s own work is in determining how sessions will be run.

Through my analysis of scholarship, I formed an understanding on how identity politics are integral to writing center pedagogy by promoting agency within the center and within individual sessions. I was able to see throughout my own tutoring practices how practices that benefit multiple identities can be useful in giving writers that sense of agency within their work. After looking at my journals, I did note that binary practices and categorizing writers happen even if it’s not the intention of the consultant. Binaries seem to be ever present in the back of the minds of new writing center tutors. It is arguable, however, on the extent of the role that they will play in affecting identity politics in the writing center when looking at specific sessions that I’ve observed. Learning about the different binary concepts is a necessity, but I observed practices in the writing center that bring into question whether binaries automatically undermine productive sessions, or if they just play a necessary role in determining how sessions are shaped. As mentioned before, writing centers are fluid spaces, and are constantly being shaped by outside influences. The components of what make up our identity, such as sex, gender, and the politics attributed to them, are “fraught with complication and the potential for misunderstanding” (Denny, 2010, p. 87). Through observation, however, I can attest that proper tutor training to recognize binary settings can lead to sessions that notice differences, but don’t privilege any group over another.

Identity politics are an integral part in what makes up writing center pedagogy, and I was able to explore the practices that I employed to find out what different aspects lead to productive sessions in regard to embracing writing identity. Looking at these results helps to understand that the writing center practices are not dichotomous: identity can be embraced in writing center sessions while still acknowledging the existence of binaries in the tutoring practice. I was able to form a deeper understanding of how much of an impact writing can have on a student’s development of themselves, and how much we, as consultants, can help them find that.

**Works Cited**


