

1-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Gillam, Alice M. (1991) "Writing Center Ecology: A Bakhtinian Perspective," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1223>

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Writing Center Ecology: A Bakhtinian Perspective

Alice M. Gillam

Like a fertile, overgrown garden, the writing center breeds conversations between writer and tutor which grow and spread in directions neither consciously intends. Voices of others—past and current teachers, friends, parents, other texts—intrude, and boundaries between the language of the writer, reader, and text blur. Like fussy gardeners, those of us charged with tending to this environment try to keep things under control by pruning back the conversation and staking out borders: “Let the writer set the agenda”; “Don’t let the writer use your words”; “Keep the ownership of the paper with the writer.”

These efforts, while well intended and even necessary, fail to accomplish their goal of offering clearcut guidelines and a coherent philosophy. As Tilly Eggers suggests, “Things fall apart . . . pretty regularly in a Writing Center . . . [and] when things do not fall apart, the Center is too fixed” (33). From a Bakhtinian perspective, this state of affairs is neither surprising nor unsettling; rather, it is a natural result of the multi-vocality and contradictions inherent in language. In this essay, I argue that reading our writing center past and present through the work of critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin offers new perspectives on writing center ecology.

Re-reading the Past

I was first introduced to peer tutoring in the mid-1960s when I was assigned as an undergraduate to help problem writers at my university. Like many of its era, my university’s writing center acted as a “normalizing” agent, the guardian of what Bakhtin calls the “centripetal forces” in language which serve to centralize, unify, and stabilize language (*Dialogic Imagination* 271). In the

university, these forces operate through grammatical rules, discourse conventions, and textbook prescriptions. As a tutor, my job was to offer a crash course in these matters, a Berlitz course in the “authoritative discourse” of the academy which Bakhtin describes as “prior discourse . . . a given [which] demands our unconditional allegiance . . . the word of the fathers” (342).

What this concept of the writing center failed to account for were the “centrifugal forces” of language with which centripetal forces continually contend. According to Bakhtin, centrifugal forces, which he calls *heteroglossia*, perpetually destabilize language through multiple meanings, varying contexts, and the free play of dialects (271). As an untrained novice tutor, I was keenly aware of destabilizing forces which constantly undermined my attempts to diagnose problems and prescribe solutions. But since I had no name for them, I assumed that the failures were my fault—“if I only knew more about grammar and the rules of good writing.”

Years later, in the late seventies, I came to another university’s writing center, this time as a graduate student in composition and rhetoric. Although the university at large still expected writing centers to act as normalizing agents, writing center practitioners increasingly viewed themselves as liberating agents, working to free students from the oppressive, centripetal forces of academic discourse. I embraced this radically revised version of the writing center with enthusiasm. In this scenario, I need not pretend to be an expert. In good conscience, I could train other tutors to be good listeners who reflected back the writer’s emerging ideas and facilitated the writer’s self-expression.

While the conception of the writing center as liberatory is appealing, certainly more appealing than the one it replaced, I now see it as mistaken in theory and practice. Again, the ideas of Bakhtin—or more precisely of Volosinov, Bakhtin’s other self or collaborator—explain why. In its own way, this view of tutoring was also “monological,” only this time the writer’s voice prevailed. Undergirded by romantic theories of language, the liberatory approach imagined writers as possessing innate, pure ideas which yearned for expression. Although the tutor might act as amanuensis, it was important that the tutor not influence the writer’s voice which would contaminate its purity of insight and expression.

Bakhtin/Volosinov argues that there is no such thing as unique, innate ideas or experience outside of language: “It is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around—*expression organizes experience*” (*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* 85). Further, our language and construction of meaning occur through social interaction:

The word is a *two-sided act*. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. . . . A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on

my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor. (86)

By privileging the writer's voice and restraining the tutor's, the liberatory center stunted the growth of conversation, the writing center's richest resource.

Re-reading the Present

I recount this personal and shared history because the concepts of the writing center as normalizing agent and liberating agent are still operative. Though I would like to characterize our center at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as a dialogizing agent, we inevitably enfold these other two identities into our agency, making us a double or actually a triple agent. Like Bakhtin, we wish to foreground the centrifugal forces of language—the writer's accent which may be nonstandard, foreign, or idiosyncratic, and the writer's perspective which may be unconventional in form or style. Yet we must also address the centripetal forces at work in our students' writing and academic lives—the proficiency test which they must pass to achieve junior standing, the knowledge of discourse conventions they need to remain in school and to pursue professional goals.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, these tensions in language and this multiple agency can serve positive, creative ends. The tensions which seem so indigentous to writing center life, the competing ideologies and mixed loyalties which collide and contend on a daily, even hourly basis, can be re-read as positive, as providing fertile ground for writing and talk about writing.

However, pronouncing these conflicts positive does not take us very far in terms of actual practice. Here again, Bakhtin comes to my aid. Specifically, I would like to suggest that his notions of *dialogism*, *addressivity*, and *answerability* offer lenses through which we might re-conceptualize current practice. To illustrate this re-conceptualization, I will use an excerpt from a recent tutoring case study as a point of reference.

In this tutoring case study, Belinda, a novice peer tutor, comments on her semester-long work with Mary, a returning adult basic writer:

As I listen I feel a sense of loss, knowing that Mary has stripped this story to its skeleton to please her instructor and me. Almost all the vivid details are gone. This semester, like a Zen master in a cheap Kung Fu movie, I've exhorted Mary to focus.

Belinda, herself an aspiring fiction writer, feels pulled between Mary's mesmerizing narrative voice and the teacher's expectation for focus and unity of theme. However, given Mary's desire to succeed, Belinda feels she has no choice but to encourage Mary to "normalize" her voice so that it can be heard and found acceptable in the academy. Reading this all-too-familiar case, I, too,

feel a sense of loss. But what were Belinda's alternatives, I wonder? How might a Bakhtinian perspective have enabled Belinda to respond differently?

Continuing her description of this tutoring encounter, Belinda writes:

Mary's essay was to be on her reading habits. What she shared with me was an explosion of experience, barely contained on the four pages she presented me. The explosion opened with the sentence, "Reading is an essential tool of which individuals can gain information." It went on to discuss her early years living with alcoholic parents, the grades she received in math in second grade, the semester she had in college studying nursing, a humorous anecdote about finding (or in this case not finding) the meaning of words through context clues, several biblical quotations, and a section describing her current goals.

After she read it, I remember asking her to read it once again while the word "focus" lit up in my mind as though it were neon. I asked her for the assignment directions and read them several times before asking her, "What is the main thing you're trying to say?"

In Belinda's mind, the battle is between the externally imposed centripetal force of the teacher's demand for focus and the centrifugal forces embedded in Mary's essay—the loosely connected anecdotes, the multivocal intonations, the mixed emotions about her reading past. But what would happen if Belinda had been able to see these opposing forces as an opportunity to explore options rather than as a battleground in which one side had to win and one side had to lose?

Bakhtin would suggest that in apparent disunity there are always forces working toward unity and in unity always forces working toward disunity. Mary's first sentence—"Reading is an essential tool of which individuals can be informed"—suggests a centralizing force both in its dissonant tone and conventional message. The unidiomatic phrasing, as well as the sentiment, sound like someone else's words which Mary has borrowed but not yet "populated with [her] own intention, [her] own accent" (*Dialogic Imagination* 293). What if this "truism" about the value of reading were re-accented in Mary's voice and then deployed as a repeated litany against which Mary's experiences could reverberate? Playing with various options, Belinda might ask Mary what would be gained or lost in rendering this experience in standard essay form with a clear, unproblematic thesis statement like "Reading is important, but it is hard for me"? Or alternatively, what would be gained or lost in using a less conventional structure in which the social injunction were interspersed with disparate bits of narrative?

The central question, perhaps, is whether the univocal conventional wisdom about reading ought to organize Mary's interpretation of her experience or whether her experiences ought to reorganize or complicate conventional wisdom. After all, Mary is in college despite a high school teacher's prediction

that she would never go beyond high school given her eighth-grade reading level. And although she has been described by her academic counselor as a “non-reader,” she reads the Bible on a daily basis.

I am suggesting, in other words, that opening or dialogizing this text through the play of oppositions might enable Mary to see ways of satisfying her teacher’s demand for focus without sacrificing richness of voice and detail. Indeed, the richness of voice and detail may hold the key to focus. Rather than stripping her “story” to the bone in order to impose a focus, perhaps Mary needs to flesh out the contradictions embedded in the text and puzzle over the off-key shifts in voice as a way of discovering focus. Once discovered, the focus, which need not be univocal nor simple, might then suggest ways of managing and rearranging the text. In short, a Bakhtinian perspective might have allowed Belinda to help Mary see the dissonances in voice and narrative as opportunities to dialogize and clarify meaning rather than as the enemies of focus, as forces to be subdued and “normalized.”

For this to occur, however, Belinda would have to enlist Mary’s full participation. Although the seeds for opening or dialogizing Mary’s text are already present in her draft, Belinda can do no more than set the process in motion by asking questions and conversing about options. If the text is to become dialogized, it must be Mary who invokes and engages the multiple voices implicit in the text.

And this is where Bakhtin’s concept of *addressivity* offers a useful perspective on the tutorial conversation. *Addressivity* goes beyond traditional notions of audience to include the writer’s “inner audience,” the topic or “hero” of the discourse, and other discourses or utterances about that subject. According to Bakhtin/Volosinov, “each person’s inner world and thought has its stabilized [inner] *social audience* that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values, and so on are fashioned” (*Marxism* 86). Consequently, inner audience as well as outer audience participates in the construction of meaning. Further, any piece of writing addresses other utterances, spoken and written: “The work is a link in a chain . . . Like a rejoinder in a dialogue it is related to other utterances: both those to which it responds and those that respond to it” (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* 76). In short, *addressivity* incorporates “the otherness of language in general and of given dialogic partners in particular” (Clark and Holquist 217).

The tutorial conversation enacts this rich sense of *addressivity*, “this quality of turning to another,” (*Speech Genres* 99) in a variety of ways. Most obviously, the tutor is a literal addressee who can offer immediate response. Ideally, the tutor offers multiple responses, some the tutor’s own, some those of other addressees. Although Belinda acted in at least two responsive roles, as “captivated,” appreciative listener and as critical surrogate teacher, she represented these responses to Mary as irreconcilable. But what if Belinda were to dramatize

her responses in dialogical terms, looking for points of intersection? The lover of stories might encourage, “Tell me about how you felt about your grades in second grade math; tell me about your favorite passages in the Bible; tell me more about the semester you studied nursing.” The critic, on the other hand, might challenge, “What do your grades in second grade math have to do with your reading? If reading is difficult for you, why do you read the Bible so consistently? How did your semester of pre-nursing courses affect you as a reader?” Perhaps the critical response would still have drowned out the appreciative one, but perhaps Mary could have used both to gain a new perspective on her text.

Through the tutor’s responses, the writer begins to see the text through the eyes of the tutor and this alters the meaning of the text. Once this happens, once one has received a response or “rejoinder,” one’s utterances are altered and take on a double life; that is, one’s utterances live in a “combined context made up of one’s own words and the words of another” (*Dialogic Imagination* 284). As Belinda is all too aware, the tutor’s responses inevitably affect subsequent writing. Even if the writer dismisses the tutor’s responses, those responses affect the writer’s attitude and conception of the piece.

The tutorial conversation also enacts the concept of *addressivity* in that the writer herself becomes an addressee as she reads the text aloud. Hearing the intonations or emotional coloration in the text, the writer becomes a listener and a reader of her own text. In addition, this oral performance of the text encourages a separation between writer and text which can in turn enable the writer to see the distinction between what Mary Louise Buley-Meissner calls “the self writing and the self which is written.” From this perspective the writer can begin to engage in a dialogue with her text. For Mary’s part, I suspect that her ear was as keen as her voice was strong, and with a little encouragement, she might have been able to detect the discordant notes and to hear the shifts from anger to determination, from pride to shame. Such a perspective would then set the stage for rewriting her experience.

Finally, the tutor can introduce into the conversation other aspects of *addressivity*. “To what other texts does this text respond?” Belinda might ask. In Mary’s case, such texts might include stories of adults who have overcome reading difficulties, articles about the importance of reading to children, biblical injunctions about the need for perseverance in the face of adversity. Or the tutor might ask, “To what inner audiences is this writing addressed?” Mary’s inner audiences, I imagine, might include former teachers who labeled her a “poor reader,” her alcoholic parents who never read to her, and a society which is willing to dismiss her as unintelligent because she has difficulty reading.

Related to the concept of *addressivity* is the concept of *answerability*. In addressing others, we participate in communal life which Bakhtin sees as a moral imperative. The idea of *answerability*, in other words, adds an ethical dimension to *addressivity*. According to Clark and Holquist, Bakhtin’s critical biographers,

Bakhtin develops the idea of *answerability* in an untranslated, untitled text which they call *The Architectonics of Answerability*. In this text, Bakhtin claims we are answerable “for our unique place in existence” and for “the means by which we relate that uniqueness to the rest of the world which is other to it. . . . We must be responsible, or answerable, for ourselves” (64). And it is through activity, through performances of all kinds, that we answer “other selves and the world from the unique place and time [we] occupy in existence” (64).

The Bakhtinian self who “answers” is at once socially created and unique: socially created in that it “exists only dialogically,” only in relation to others and that which is other (65-66); unique in that its “locus of apperception,” its place in time and space, is singular (69). Our “answers,” then, whether they be words or deeds, are simultaneously the means by which we participate communally and the means by which we announce our difference. Through our “answers” we “author” or continually shape our selves in response to others and the world. And although these “answers” are populated with others’ voices and intentions, they are nonetheless our unique contribution to what Michael Oakeshott calls the “conversation of mankind.”

Although this is an oversimplified rendering of a complex concept, the idea of *answerability* offers ethical grounds for the dilemmas we frequently face in writing center work. In his recently published *Dialogue, Dialectic, and Conversation*, Gregory Clark refers to this Bakhtinian ethic by saying, “Because the language we use makes us, unavoidably, participants in a meaning-making dialogue, we must hold ourselves responsible for that meaning we help to make” (9).

Participants in the tutorial conversation are jointly as well as separately “answerable” for the meaning created through this conversation. This joint responsibility is implicit in the root word for *conversation*, *to converse* which means to “turn together” (Singley and Boucher 11). No matter who said what or how much each talked, conversation creates and alters meaning, and for that meaning both participants are responsible. On the other hand, tutor and writer are “answerable” in ways that are not co-extensive. Since the tutor’s response intervenes in the writer’s process and alters the writer’s “answer,” the tutor is responsible by role and training to make that response as enabling as possible. This means, in part, that the tutor bears a responsibility to be the kind of addressee who enables the writer to “answer” or accept responsibility for the text. At the same time, the tutor can never fully anticipate the writer’s response to the tutor’s intervention; therefore, the tutor can only act according to her best judgment in the given circumstance while continuing to assess and revise that judgment in light of the writer’s response.

In the case of Belinda and Mary, Belinda’s answerability would entail careful reading of Mary’s responses to her invitations to reconsider the text. Had Belinda undertaken the dialogic responses suggested earlier, such responses may

or may not have enabled Mary to reconceptualize her text in productive ways. Indeed, such responses might have “disabled” or confused her. The tutor’s answerability, then, is not a matter of set responses, but rather a readiness to alter her approach in response to the writer’s reactions and ideas. Plainly, Belinda feels responsible, perhaps too responsible, for “stripping” away the richness of voice and detail in Mary’s text; but in another sense, Belinda is enacting her answerability in her willingness to question her intervention and to consider options for responding differently.

Most importantly, the tutor’s answerability entails a recognition of the limits of her ability to answer for the text and the need to allow the writer to be fully answerable. After all, the tutor’s response is useful to the writer precisely because it is other than, not identical to, the writer’s answer. It is Mary not Belinda who must answer for and to the paper she submits; it is Mary not Belinda who must continually answer for and to her reading past.

The writer’s answerability in Bakhtinian terms goes beyond simply being the one who is held accountable, the one who receives the grade. For Bakhtin, writing is the author’s “answer” to others and to the world; the writer is responsible for the answer that is the text. Moreover, the writer is responsible for the responses set in motion by her “answer.” To be answerable is to be continually turning, continually engaged in a conversation that has no end.

And it is in this sense that the writing center, too, is answerable. For we who participate in the writing center are responsible for authoring a social discourse that remains perpetually open, continually turning; a social discourse that addresses and answers to many divergent audiences—each other, our own inner audiences, the writers we serve, the faculty, university administrators, and the community at large—and that recognizes the dialogical relationship between the centripetal and centrifugal forces in language. Like our tutors, we who direct writing centers must offer advice, make policies, and act according to our best judgment while at the same time recognizing the absence of fixed answers, predictable outcomes, and determinate meanings. And like our tutors, our answerability entails observant reading of the local scene and constant assessment and revision of our judgments.

For Bakhtin, the fact that we, individually or collectively, can never arrive at certain answers nor establish a final, “unitary identity” is “not to be lamented,” but rather to be celebrated (Clark and Holquist 66). In this spirit, then, we may act as “merry” gardeners who cultivate the writing center as fertile ground for the play of language, knowing that things will inevitably grow out of control and that borders will need to be continually restaked but also that our labors will often yield fruitful rewards.

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