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# The Writing Center Conference and the Textuality of Power

*Michael A. Joyner*

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In two recent articles, Jennifer Herek and Mark Niquette's "Ethics in the Writing Lab: Tutoring Under the Honor Code" and Stacey Freed's "Subjectivity in the Tutorial Session: How Far Can We Go?" the place of tutors in writing center conferences has been brought into question with reference to whether they should always assume an "objective" stance toward the text under discussion or if they should on certain occasions venture into the realm of the "subjective." Before issues of the place of objectivity/subjectivity in conferences can be addressed, however, more basic definitional and conceptual questions demand attention. What does objectivity signify when used to describe the relationship of a reader to a text? In what sense is it possible to avoid subjectivity when involved in a discourse about a text?<sup>1</sup> Is there a line, a boundary between the objective and the subjective that should not be passed or broken in a tutorial because such a breaking would constitute an ethical violation? Louise Smith has proposed that "the negotiations that go on in writing conferences are political acts" (3),<sup>2</sup> and, indeed, the above questions are political and must be addressed from the viewpoint of ideology and how it functions in student writing and in the writing center conference.

Herek and Niquette address the problem of the limits and appropriateness of writing center tutors' substantive and ideological input in a conference; in training new tutors in their writing center, they stress:

minimal-input tutoring: tutors ask questions rather than give answers. The emphasis of the tutorial session is to keep the pen or

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keyboard in the student's hand, to minimize the amount of tutor input into the tutee's ideas and inspiration. (14)

The assumptions underlying this theory of tutor training and the practice that should result from it are that the writer is an autonomous agent who has the power to generate a piece of writing from him/herself with the right prompts or cues and that "inspiration" arises from this central self. These are Platonic epistemological assumptions which harken back to Plato's theory of knowledge as recollection in the *Meno* and *Phaedrus* and which, as Karen LeFevre explains, constitute invention as "the act of an atomistic individual who recollects or uncovers ideas from within, all the time remaining apart from a material and social world" (8).<sup>3</sup> These assumptions, however, have been called into question by the work of poststructuralist thinking. Does "minimal-input tutoring" allow students to place their texts in a larger process of deliberation, to partake in the play of intertextuality, or does it offer them a narrow and fettered conception of the text as a self-generated, autonomous piece of work which has its genesis in the central, individual consciousness of a determined self that functions outside the dominant ideology of the scene of writing?

Herek and Niquette see the question of subjectivity—"to what degree does a tutor's role extend to helping with the ideas and content of an assignment" (12)—as an ethical problem. The assumption underlying this view of subjectivity as a problem is that there is a distinction between the writing and the ideas signified by the writing. Platonic epistemological assumptions also inhabit their answer to this question:

In the tutoring process, tutors inevitably reach an imaginary line which establishes an *ethical boundary*. On one side of this line, the tutor's actions are justifiably ethical because they allow the tutee to learn and develop original insights. The tutor guides his or her tutee in this pursuit with appropriate questions, encouragement, and any available resources. (12)

Again, this procedure is a Socratic/Platonic dialectical process that will lead to insight (inspiration?) and learning (one is reminded of the young geometry student of the *Meno* who is shown that he actually knew the Pythagorean Theorem but simply needed to answer the correct questions to bring the knowledge to the conscious level). For Herek and Niquette, to cross the "imaginary line" from the objective (asking the "appropriate questions") into the subjective ("taking away [the student's] chance to discover ideas independently") is to deny students their "original insights" and to venture into an unethical realm of teaching (13). In this view, writing center tutors are to

prompt students into invention and then help with the arrangement of the material yielded by this individual inspiration; in other words, tutors function in the realm of the objective.<sup>4</sup>

Stacey Freed interviewed writing center tutors in several universities and questioned them on their views of the place of subjectivity in the writing center conference. She found that most writing center tutors “had the urge to enter discussion/debate with their students, but saw the writing itself as the first priority and then looked at subject matter in an objective way” (40). Again that elusive term *objective* presents itself as a self-evident strategy of textual analysis, a strategy which one should automatically set against a *subjective* analysis, and a distinction between text and meaning is assumed. Freed herself believes that a tutorial should “always focus on the student’s written work . . . no matter how personal it becomes, we must always go back to the task at hand, the writing” (42), but she does think there should be a certain amount of play of the objective/subjective:

[In] our objectivity, our “respect for the work of the individual,” we must make students aware of other points of view that may be “disturbing” to them and may “distress” them; and we should, if we believe an individual case warrants it, overstep the boundaries and be subjective . . . in expressing these views. (42-3)

I agree that we should, indeed, “overstep the boundaries”; however, this overstepping should occur not only if “we believe an individual case warrants it,” but in every individual tutorial, for, in fact, this seeming overstepping is not really a breaking of boundaries at all. If we deal with the text as a text in the poststructuralist understanding of it as a play of ambiguous signifiers, it is not possible to be objective—to see from the outside only the surface of the text (as if the “writing” and the “content” were in some way separate). This is not the way a text functions, it is not the way reading (which is another text) works, and it is misleading if we attempt to convince students that their texts exist as autonomous creations. I think Freed’s suggestion a good one; however, it must be radicalized (textualized) and politicized based on an understanding of writing as a struggle for power, as taking part in the larger deliberative discourse which is writing in a larger sense.

All texts partake of a multi-dimensional struggle: the struggle of the writer to write; the struggle of the reader to read the writing and, thereby, write the writing; the struggle of the text to locate itself in the larger discourse of which it is a part; the struggle of meaning to announce itself by means of a sign system that is at once ambiguous and playful; and, finally, the struggle for power in the face of the dominant ideology into which the text thrusts

itself. In the writing center conference, overbearing and vague notions of the objective should not result in a discussion of student writing which brackets off these struggles, which are inherent in the nature of writing and of the text; rather, students should be made aware of these struggles and of the ideology which underlies even the most innocent-seeming text. It is within this matrix of struggle that a working toward an understanding of subjectivity, of objectivity, of the subject (both as writer and reader) and of how these concepts do or should function in the writing center conference must locate itself.

Richard Macksey has noted that one of the central concerns of poststructuralist thought is “the status of the subject” (qtd. in Schilb 425), and John Trimbur writes that in poststructuralism “the self has been reconstituted as a social process, a discursive formative embedded in a web of linguistic codes” (8). The subject or self, in other words, is no longer viewed as a static entity possessing a definite, identifiable identity but is understood as socio-historically and linguistically constituted. What Trimbur refers to as the “embedded” self is also a dis/em(bed)ded self that has been raised from the sleep of a centered, autonomous self which has always already been dis/em(bed)ded. The concept of a constituted subject also problematizes subjectivity. In reference to this problematization, Derrida writes that “through infinite circulation and references, from sign to sign and from representer to representer, the selfsameness of presense [sic] has no longer a place: no one is there for anyone, not even for himself” (233). It is within the play of language, in the world as text, or, as John Schilb puts it, within “the tropological operations through which the ‘subject’ is shakily configured” (425) that the subjective locates itself, not in an individual consciousness possessing separate ontological status. Further, subjectivity is an ideological construct situated in a particular historical moment. Subjectivity is, therefore, an objective state, a mode of being determined by the ideology in which it functions. Subjectivity does not arise “like an unfathered vapour” (Wordsworth 6.595) in the consciousness of an individual; indeed, consciousness also is itself a construct of language and the ideological matrix in which people move. In other words, the subjective is the objective, or, even more accurately, there is neither subjective nor objective; rather, there is a play of “linguistic codes” and the struggle of ideologies for hegemony (this ideological struggle is itself, of course, caught up and implicated as well in the play of language).

The Western tradition defines the subject as that entity “in which ideas inhere; that to which all mental representations or operations are attributed;

the thinking or organizing agent; the self or ego" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 9). I have attempted to outline reasons why this Cartesian view of the subject is in need of and has received revision, but other significations of the term are at work in a pedagogy that attempts to draw a distinction between the subjective and the objective and to imply that any instructional strategy that breaks the boundary and ventures into the "subjective" is in some way unethical or questionable.<sup>5</sup> A slight phonological shift takes us from the subject as ego to the subject as that subjected, to the verbal form: to subject, to repress, to suppress, to oppress, to rule, to keep down, to consume in ideology not avowed as ideology. The conception of the subject as an autonomous, individual existent subjects this mythical subject; denies it a place in the play of language and ideology, which play constitutes the subject; and attempts to locate it outside, beyond this play. This attempted location of the subject outside the play of language and ideology can lead to a belief that people are not implicated in an ideology and that they are not under the power of that ideology. The rejection of the subject and the subjective/objective distinction empowers people to bring ideology to the fore, to question the hegemonic practices of one ideology over another, and to see how the language in which they participate is appropriated into ideological struggle and used to mask it.

In the writing center conference, to treat a text objectively and as the product of a centered self is to mislead students into thinking that their texts do not participate in a struggle for power, that we as tutors do not participate in this struggle. I do not mean to imply that writing center tutors consciously make this attempt at covering the function of ideology in student writing; however, an attempt at objectivity is just such a covering. Students should be made aware of the larger discourse in which their writing participates and that, as Susan Hynds writes, "Writers and texts are simultaneously agents and agencies of change, as writers participate in a variety of discourse practices within particular social and institutional contexts" (77), not led to believe their writing exists independently of all other texts nor that it has its genesis in their own inspiration. As Gregory Ulmer has noted, the "postmodern understanding of creativity . . . rejects Romantic theories of 'genius' and 'originality' while reviving something like the medieval sense of *inventio*—invention as . . . *discovery* rather than as 'creation' (something out of nothing)" (59-60). Bringing textuality and the struggle for power to the fore allows students to take part in what John Trimbur has called "critical and emancipatory literacy" (5) and enables them to participate in the textuality of power and to realize that no text or writing is innocent and autonomous

but is caught up in and can be used to challenge the dominant ideology.

Making use of poststructural and politically aware strategies in the classroom or the writing center is a direct challenge to the traditional classroom, writing center, and university. In their traditional forms, these entities are conceived as bastions and propagators of a pre-existing body of knowledge that is to be offered to students by means of an apolitical presentation, with instructors and/or tutors either masking or repressing their political awareness and their cognizance of the political nature of educational institutions. Appropriating the theory I am advocating is, therefore, a political statement on the part of the instructor or tutor in that students are made aware of the educational power structures within which they move and are asked to question these structures and to understand knowledge not as a stable body of ideas that is handed down from generation to generation but as a discursive process that is in constant need of question and revision. The cornerstone of liberal education and of the university is just such questioning, and theories which enable us as educators to facilitate students' abilities to understand the political and unstable nature of education and knowledge are, while viewed by some in academia as radical, both beneficial and enlightening.

There are several useful articles on appropriating deconstruction/poststructuralism in the composition and literature classroom,<sup>6</sup> and many of the assumptions and strategies of these analyses are applicable to the writing center conference. As David Kaufer and Gary Waller explain:

Deconstruction, in short, can be a powerful ally to teachers of literature and composition, apart or together, to direct students to the omnipresent, untrustworthy, yet unavailable, power and powerlessness of language. (68)

One reader of an earlier version of this essay commented that most undergraduates are not ready for poststructuralism "in the raw." This perception may, indeed, be accurate. Most students who enter the writing center for assistance, especially first- and second-year students, are not aware of contemporary theoretical literary and political thought, but this does not necessarily imply that these theories cannot be appropriated in the writing center conference. It is possible to locate students' texts intertextually and to make them aware of the fact that their texts are so located without using the language of poststructuralist theory; in other words, a conference informed by poststructuralist theory would not be a crash course in Derrida or de Man.

Rather than using the poststructuralist term "intertextuality," we, as writing center tutors, can make students aware of the fact that all texts are

reactions to and arguments for/against preceding precursor texts, and by informing students that their texts partake of this intertextuality, again, without using the word, their writing will take on greater significance for them and manifest itself as more than simply an academic exercise undertaken at the coercion of an instructor to fulfill the requirements of a certain course. For example, if students are writing essays on parental notification before a minor can obtain an abortion, it is the responsibility of the writing center tutor not simply to read the students' texts and test them against preconceived notions of full development and logical argument, but to inform the students that many texts previously have been generated on this topic and to question them on where they feel their texts enter into this larger arena of discourse and what they contribute to it. Such a locating of their texts will offer students a sense of empowerment, a sense that their writing is important and significant.

Within the framework of the poststructuralist-informed writing center conference, considerations and discussions of the ideologically motivated nature of writing also are more easily brought to the fore. The following postulation of Kaufer and Waller, though addressed to the classroom, is applicable to the writing center, in which the type of conference I am advocating can

help to dislocate the ideologies with which our students so often commence their university studies. . . . What we can do is to encourage them to become more self-aware of the power of such schemes, to become, in short, theoreticians (even deconstructionists, *though we would not necessarily use the term* [my emphasis]). (68-9)

Again, the writing center conference can be made a more overtly political structure without a discussion which includes the jargon or terminology of any particular political theory. Continuing to use the example of the students' essays on parental notification, the writing center tutor should explicitly question and solicit a justification of the ideology which informs the essays. Is it a conservative, phallogocentric ideology determined to suppress women even in relation to their reproductive functions; a liberal/humanistic ideology granting the right of unquestioned abortion even though this ideology may, indeed, find it difficult to support such a position; or a radical ideology fighting for the power/empowerment of people as part of a large collective society in which freedom of choice must be guaranteed by the efforts of the masses and not left to the decisions of those in possession of state power? The ideological stance of the text also should be contextualized with reference to opposing or divergent ideologies. Discussion and debate, not



objectivity, are necessary to every conference. The writing center tutor's responsibility is not, however, to proselytize on behalf of any particular ideological perspective; there is a difference between enlightened discussion of the ideological nature of a text and such proselytizing. Students should be made aware of the fact that their texts are expressions of ideology, whether that ideology is consciously expressed or explicitly textualized or not.

A writing center conference grounded in an appropriation of poststructuralist theories of language and an awareness of the political nature of writing need not be one in which these theories are the center of the conference. However, these theories can affect the way in which the conference is conducted. It could become a more open-ended structure if students are informed from the outset that their writing is not a thing to itself, that the form and rhetorical structure of an essay are not separate aspects of the text from its substantive content, and that, especially in the argumentative writing which is the backbone of academic discourse, politics is important and relevant even when it is not an explicit theme of a certain text. Again, this making relevant of political dimensions need not result in a discussion of textual presence/absence, but it can make students more aware of the power a piece of writing exerts and the power play in which it participates, thereby empowering them seriously to enter the arena of academic discourse/language (or any other discourse). Further, students can take this empowerment beyond the writing center conference and the particular text under discussion and use it to challenge and, if you will, deconstruct the ideological power structures of the universe(ity) in which they move.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The signification of subjectivity which I shall take issue with and attempt to deconstruct is that which posits that any reactions to a text other than those which deal with its "surface" structure are "subjective."

<sup>2</sup>Smith's essay is an interesting analysis of writing center conferences in terms of family systems theory and the way in which the shifting focuses of power/submission function in them.

<sup>3</sup>LeFevre thinks Western traditions have supported this Platonic view of invention:

traditions in literary studies emphasizing the individual unit as a focus of study; romantic notions of the isolated creator, inspired

from within; and a strong regard for individualism in capitalistic, patriarchal societies. (22)

See her *Invention as a Social Act* (10-22) for an excellent, in-depth explanation of the influence of these traditions on conceptions of invention.

<sup>4</sup>I appropriate this distinction between “invention” and “arrangement” from Jasper Neel’s analysis of Plato’s use of these concepts. Neel, however, explains that this distinction is not really a distinction at all, but that

the division of discourse into invention and arrangement . . . turns out to be an opening in which the idea of discourse can be discussed. Plato creates a place in discourse where he can expose the two processes that constitute discourse, invention and arrangement. (61)

<sup>5</sup>I continue to use the terms *subjective*, *objective*, *subjectivity*, and *objectivity* because these are the only terms I possess; however, I use them in the Derridian sense of “under erasure” (Derrida 23, 61).

<sup>6</sup>The Atkins and Johnson text is an excellent introduction to the meditations on deconstruction/poststructuralism and the classroom. See also Thomas Nash for a discussion directly relating the Derridian notion of “free play” to prewriting strategies in the writing center.

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