Nurturant Ethics and Academic Ideals: Convergence in the Writing Center

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Mothering and Working: Initial Thoughts about a Balance in the Center

It may have started for me that day in 1989, at the drugstore counter in Austin, Texas. I was there with my one-year-old sons and my three-year-old daughter. The twins were fussing and squirming in their stroller—one of them had an ear infection, and so we were at the drugstore picking up an antibiotic which I hoped would bring more restful nights to all of us. My daughter, her attention drawn to every colorful display near the counter where we stood, was struggling to free her hand from my grasp. One-handed, I attempted to fill out the insurance form that accompanied the prescription. The pharmacist, observing my difficulty, sympathetically offered to help me with what I had learned to consider the “literacy task” of filling out the form. She took the pen and began reading the questions to me. Name? Address? Home phone number? Work number? At this last question she stopped to survey the four of us. I was pushing the stroller back and forth in a rocking motion, attempting to calm the twins whose wails were beginning to attract the notice of strangers. The pharmacist smiled at me in a knowing and sympathetic way. “I guess that’s kind of a silly question, isn’t it? With all those children, surely you don’t have time to work too!”

But in fact I was “working.” What the pharmacist didn’t realize was that mothering was only, as Arlie Hochschild would say, the “second shift” of my work day. For part of the day I was gainfully employed as the temporary director of the writing lab in the University of Texas English Department.
Certainly I was feeling unsettled at times—as though my dual role required me to split my personality. When I wasn’t trying to be a skilled professional, helping TAs and undergraduate students think productively about writing, I was trying to be “just a mother,” attentive and responsive to my children’s many different needs. But at times I was able to see that my two personalities were in fact only different aspects of the same me, and that they were really not so separate from one another. Whether I was at work or at home my performance was guided by many of the same principles, and perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that my home life and my work life actually reinforced one another as I struggled to learn simultaneously how to be a better teacher and a better mother. At both worksites, I realized, I needed to think hard about the nature of human learning and development. How does it happen? How can I help it happen more easily, more happily, more productively? At both places I found it was important for me to be accessible to those around me—to be receptive, to try to understand, and then to respond in a way that was supportive and beneficial to others’ growth of understanding, whether those others be students, writing lab TAs, departmental administrators, or my own children. I needed to consider how my responses might prompt them to extend their abilities to give considered and confident voice to their perceptions, and to continue questioning and reflecting upon their encounters in a world shared with others. At both places, too, I found that my time was subject to more or less constant interruption. It’s the price one pays for being accessible and responsive.

It has been several years since that incident in the drug store, and I am still working on integrating the work of a double shift, although in a different location now, with enhanced academic status, and with older children to parent. I am still thinking about how the two shifts of my workdays might really just be parts of something much larger, something that I’ve learned to recognize as my quest for a unified self. A large part of the quest has involved disassembling boundaries I had either discovered or erected between the concepts of “work” and “not-work,” concepts that correlate with the categories of “professional” and “personal” life. For me, an important step in this process has been learning from my sons and daughter and from my young students—some of them now less than half my own age—to recognize youth as a full-status human condition. The very young, I’ve learned, are people who have much to show us adults about how learning is a process of revising the self, a process that is recursive and ongoing, appropriately undertaken not only during childhood, but throughout our entire lifetimes.

It has also been important for me to read and listen to feminist scholars who theorize the position of women in our society and advocate a redefinition of “women’s work”—especially the typically maternal functions of child care and homemaking. Their words and voices have prompted me to contemplate the position of “caring” as something beyond the gendered and
romanticized cultural iconography of motherhood. In attempting to liberate myself from the uncritical acceptance of this ideal, I have come to recognize caring not as an instinctive and purely emotion-powered response to young or otherwise vulnerable others, but as an intellectual and ethical choice. As I attempt to position the caring work I do in my professional role as an academic involved in individualized literacy instruction in reading and writing centers, I now find it necessary to view care as a locus of intersecting philosophical, economic, and political functions. As an academic, I have learned to recognize the rhetorical moves through which I accomplished this transformation in my thinking about care as steps in a process of "complicating" or "problematizing" the concept. As a caregiver, I sometimes wonder if all this complicating and problematizing is really such a good idea, as it consumes time and attention and energy that might be better employed just getting on with the business of life. There are times, in other words, when the integration of my separate lives is not all that secure.

Nevertheless, the paths I have traveled in my ongoing quest for a unified self have been enlightening if not wholly illuminating byways. In this essay I want to chart some of the ground I have covered on my quest. The map that emerges plots a network of trade routes among ideologies that might be labeled feminist philosophy, academic professionalism, psychosociolinguistics, and child-development theory. I could call the starting point of my travels a "locus of destabilization," a site charged with the unsettling sense that pieces of the self are simply not fitting together, that the self is divided or fragmented and out of balance. I find myself in this location not only when I confront the dissonance of my children's voices against the ticking of the tenure clock, but also when I encounter conversations in my professional community of compositionists—conversations that center uneasily on the issue of our "feminized" identity. What exactly, we wonder, does it mean to be feminized? We nervously step away from terms like "emasculation" or, worse, "castration." We are more comfortable, we sometimes decide, with the moral position and the language of victimization. To be feminized, then, is to be disempowered within the patriarchy, to be the object of systematic oppression. But the dangers in accepting victim status are readily apparent. Embracing this version of femininity as a defining component of our own professional identity generates disabling energy in the forms of anger, bitterness, and shame.

With these thoughts in mind, I am always alert to professional discussions that focus on dissonance between feminine and professional identities. One such discussion was initiated among writing center teachers and administrators at the Midwest Writing Center Association Conference in October, 1994, where Nancy Grimm spoke in her keynote address of the "gendered service role" many writing centers are assumed to perform for the academy. On the one hand, given the female majority among writing center
workers, the term “gendered” when applied to the role of writing centers in the academy seems to invite an essentialist definition: writing centers are sites where women are concentrated in the academic labor force. Lisa Birnbaum, for instance, describes the writing center she directs at the University of Tampa as a site characterized by just such a gender imbalance. But the “gendered” character of writing centers reflects as well the constructedness of writing center workers. Birnbaum goes on to say that when she began to investigate the causes of gender imbalance among her writing center staff, she was told by a faculty member that her memo soliciting the names of prospective peer tutors prompted him to recommend women rather than men, partly because he “sees tutors in the writing center as female” (6), but also because the memo listed qualities that described a feminine “nurturing type” of individual as the ideal tutor: empathy, patience, sensitivity, diplomacy, friendliness, intuition, supportiveness, responsiveness, and care giving (6).

As Birnbaum’s testimony suggests, within the patriarchal institution of the American academy, writing centers are often socially constructed as feminine sites where something like the domestic, care-giving service of the academic community is carried out, and this may be true regardless of whether the work is undertaken by women or by men. Thus, in this exploration of the academic ideals that guide the missions of writing centers, it is not the gender of writing center workers that interests me so much as the gendered construction of the work itself. It is my hope that understanding how and why the American academy has employed the social construct of gender in defining the writing center as a site where caring education is promoted according to a cultural ideal of “women’s work” will enable us to consider more wisely how such work responsibilities might be equitably and productively distributed throughout the ranks of academic workers.

**Situating Writing Centers in the “Feminized Field” of Composition**

Because writing centers are so often components of or complements to composition programs, it is more or less predictable that they should fall into the category of “feminized” worksites. Composition itself is frequently identified as a feminized field, labeled such largely because of transformations in composition pedagogy that proceed from assumptions central to feminist pedagogy with its adoption of nurturance as the central model of the pedagogical process (Cully and Portuges): the shift in emphasis from written product to writing process, the development of “student-centered” approaches that seek to recognize and honor the diverse experiences and language skills students bring to the classroom, the emphasis on collaboration and sharing of knowledge, the insistence upon substantive, respectful responses to the content and style of student texts. Indeed, some compositionists
have eagerly embraced the “feminine” identity they see emerging in the field of composition. Elizabeth Flynn, for instance, describes the feminization of composition as a progressive development. Writing that the current identity of composition has resulted from a “feminization of our previous conceptions of how writers write and how writing should be taught” (112), Flynn goes on to explain that this feminization process involves a transformation in the subjectivity of the composition teacher that “replace[s] the figure of the authoritative father with an image of the nurturing mother” (112-113). In Flynn’s description, the transformation is clearly a positive one; the feminized pedagogical ideal is “a committed teacher, concerned about the growth and maturity of her students, who provides feedback on ungraded drafts, reads journals, and attempts to tease out meaning from the seeming incoherence of student language” (113). Donnalee Rubin similarly advocates a “maternal paradigm” of composition pedagogy, a “conference/process-based” approach to teaching that assumes the nurturant responsibilities of a teacher who seeks to “foster growth in thinking; to nurture fragile, emerging voices; to encourage active participation in dialogue; and to help students become accepted members of their social and academic communities” (62).

As the language of Flynn’s and Rubin’s comments suggests, an important step in producing a feminized conceptualization of work is the equating of the work with nurturant activity that is directed toward fostering the growth and development of an emergent other—typically an other whose state of vulnerability calls forth a care-giving response. In the case of writing centers, of course, these vulnerable and emergent others are commonly construed by the academic community as student writers who are “underprepared” or somehow “at risk,” who are experiencing difficulties or disappointments in their college writing and have come to the writing center for “help.” In actual practice, of course, this stereotype of writing center students does not hold up, but its influence is discernible nonetheless in the ideology that shapes our notions of writing center work.

In western culture, nurturant activity has long been ascribed to the feminine realm, and specifically to the province of motherhood. Care giving, as we can see in the case of faculty responses to Birnbaum’s list of desirable traits for prospective tutors, is apt to be idealized as a function of feminine nature and the attributes which presumably constitute women’s special virtues—an inclination toward intimate attachments or close interpersonal connectedness, a receptivity and a responsiveness to others, and a nurturant, maternal “instinct.” Accordingly, the construction of writing center work as a variety of women’s work has often invoked the authority of scholarship in feminist rather than traditional ethics and epistemologies. In an interview as one of the founding editors of The Writing Center Journal, for instance, Lil Brannon describes conversations with writing center tutors in which the enterprise of teaching in a writing center is assembled at least partially in
terms of "books that are in support of women and teaching, things like Women's Ways of Knowing and their notions of connected teaching" (Harris and Kinkead 7):

[M]any of our tutors believe we’re trying to enact a feminist pedagogy, where the model is maternal rather than paternal, that our role is to listen, to nurture, to have a place for ideas that are not ready for public scrutiny but potentially can be—that a student can have a place to explore and to develop (7).

Affirming this practice of constructing writing center instruction according to an ideal of "women’s work" is Barbara Cambridge’s endorsement of Madelein Grumet’s Bitter Milk as a guide to writing center pedagogy. Grumet’s book proposes educational reform on the model of maternal nurture, and Cambridge suggests that its ideology is particularly relevant to the “intimacy” of the writing center tutorial. Muriel Harris similarly employs the metaphor of nurturant caregiving in explaining the nature of the academic work that is carried out in writing centers. "It may be that writing centers attract those who are of a helping, nurturing bent anyway,” she writes, “who see themselves as providing ways for others to grow and develop their own skills” (“What’s Up” 16).

Critics of “maternal” or “nurturant” constructions of pedagogy, however, fear that it involves students in what Susan Miller has described as a process of “infantalization.” The student’s need or desire for academic help is perceived as “childlike,” and the writing center becomes accordingly a sort of academic nursery—a private, contained, domestic space where “immature” student writers can develop and practice the skills they need to survive in the more rigorous and sophisticated, public, “adult” realms of academe. When this infantalized subjectivity is associated with writing center students, it calls to mind certain negative qualities by which teaching may be identified as “soft” labor—labor that activates emotional rather than intellectual engagement. Consider, for instance, the contempt that usually accompanies descriptions of teaching as “spoon feeding” or “hand holding” or as “touchy-feely” activity. Aware of outsiders’ perceptions of the writing center as a site where such teaching practices may flourish, Muriel Harris acknowledges that writing centers “may still have to contend with a diminishing minority who view them as unnecessary frills, sucking up funds, space, and personnel to duplicate what goes on in the classroom or to coddle remedial students who shouldn’t have been admitted in the first place” (“Why Writers” 40).

**Vulnerable Students, Victimized Teachers: The Negative Value of Women’s Work in the Academy**

To understand the contempt with which labor constructed on the model of maternal care giving is apt to be regarded within the educational
community, we must consider how the institution of American education mirrors the values that structure American culture as a whole. Joan Tronto, in *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, argues that American valorization of "self reliance" requires the individual to distance him or herself from those who appear, in whatever way, vulnerable and needy and therefore pitiable. A maternally derived ethic of care, with its affirmation of an interdependent or relational sense of self by which individuals are bound to one another by ontologically basic human needs, thus conflicts with a reigning ethic that reveres autonomy. In her critique of feminist philosophy that articulates an ethic of care, Tronto suggests that the concepts of care and interpersonal or social relatedness are ill-served by their association with the cultural iconography of motherhood. The moral values of mothers, she notes, are commonly identified with "intimacy," with the emotionally charged private world of family and friends, and as such they seem irrelevant to the politics of public life. Moreover, the containment of motherhood within domestic boundaries insures the linkage of maternal caring with subordinate status in the social hierarchy. Thus contained in sites of intimate interaction, caring connectedness is easily dismissed as a narrow and parochial response to human problems and needs. Tronto's critique of care-based ethics therefore seeks to uncouple care from the feminine and romanticized model of maternal nurture by revealing how caring work is distributed in this culture. Traditionally, she notes, care-giving labor has been disproportionately assumed by those who are least well off and who have been excluded from political and economic life: women, servants, and slaves. In present-day America, most care-giving jobs continue to be held by men and women of color and by women of the working class (114). Those who occupy positions of relative privilege and power, meanwhile, tend to manage care from a considerable distance—to "care about" others, perhaps, or to "take care of" others' needs by assuming financial responsibility or by delegating care-giving responsibility from a managerial position, but rarely to "give care to" others in the sense of tending to them directly.

That the academy as an institution participates in this cultural valorization of autonomous detachment at the expense of interpersonal connectedness has become a commonplace in critiques of the academy. Walter Ong's analysis of the origins of the academy as a professional community of men set apart from the maternally dominated "lifeworld" describes how the academic ethos derives from the association of masculine identity with detached intellectual activity. Feminine identity, meanwhile, is excluded from the realm of academic endeavor because of its association with emotional attachment and interpersonal connectedness modeled after the ideal of maternal-infant bonding that represents the prototype of relational subjectivity. David Noble's *A World Without Women*, an account of the exclusively masculine history of the academy, suggests that a mysogynistic fear of
emotionality, eroticism, and intimate attachments undergirds the academic legacy of detached rationality. Peter Elbow has argued similarly from a compositionist’s perspective that the conventions of academic discourse reflect the tenaciously masculine (though certainly no longer purely male) ethic of academic authority. Elbow contends that the stylistic features of academic prose reflect an ideal of detached objectivity intent upon “separating feeling, personality, opinion, and fashion from what is essential: clear positions, arguments and evidence” (140). The conventions that inform the creation of personae in academic discourse, then, are some of the same conventions that construct Western culture’s ideal of masculine identity. The voices that speak through this identity, Elbow writes, “tend toward the sound of reasonable, disinterested, perhaps even objective (shall I say it?) men” (141).

To the extent that academic culture grounds itself in an ethic of social detachment, autonomy, and self-reliance, members of the academic community who engage in teaching roles that require a heavy investment in interpersonal relatedness, especially with students perceived as academically vulnerable or “needy,” risk a “domestic” containment that separates them from the political economy of academe. For this reason, the temptation is strong to apologize for the alleged “softness” of a nurturant approach to education—especially higher education—or to redefine the work performed in writing centers as something more intellectually rigorous and respectable, less emotionally engaged, less *motherly* than a term like “nurturant” seems to suggest. In accordance with this impulse, Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch insist that the suspected “philosophical laxity” of writing center work must be combated with “deliberate intellectual commitment” (37). The professional legitimacy of writing center work, in other words, often finds voice in an *apologia* for the supposed affective or otherwise non-rational, “maternal” qualities associated with the work of “nurturing” vulnerable others. Margaret Nelson’s study of the commodification of maternal labor in the form of home day care suggests that such denial is rooted in “a traditional ideology of mothering—and by extension, care giving in general—as ‘not work’” (604).

There are a variety of reasons for assuming an oppositional relationship between mothering and “work.” Maternal work in our culture is idealized as a labor of love, powered by instinct rather than the mastery of skills, and performed through the forging of emotional relationships that serve as their own reward. Mothering is therefore removed from the economic sphere in which work acquires its material value; the satisfactions of emotional relatedness replace wages as the currency for compensating love’s labors. There are, of course, historical reasons for the exclusion of nurturant labor from the marketplace. Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, for instance, points out that the Victorian cult of true womanhood functioned in the service of early industrial capitalism, ensoncing women
securely in the home while increasing numbers of men entered the ranks of business and industry in the public economy. Although excluded from the market place, “true women” as domestic workers were indispensable to the economy, for their unpaid labor freed men to compete for capital away from home. To the extent that writing centers are constructed as feminized worksites they risk similar containment and separation from the academic marketplace, where the value of “real,” intellectual work is negotiated.

The widespread perception among writing center personnel that their work is devalued in the academic marketplace emerges in published complaints that writing centers are academically marginalized and especially vulnerable to budget cuts and layoffs. Muriel Harris, for instance, while affirming the nurturant values of writing center work, cautions against the devaluation of this work in the broader context of the academic infrastructure. “Believing in what we do,” she writes, “we tend to accept lower salaries, poorer working conditions, lower status” (“What's Up” 20). In 1984, Stephen North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center” made a similar point. In this essay, purportedly born of “frustration” over widespread misunderstanding of what writing centers are and what they do, North concludes by exposing the economic disempowerment of writing centers. Most of the tasks undertaken by writing centers, says North, “end up there in the first place because nobody else wants to do them.... [W]hen budgets are tight, as they will be in the foreseeable future, facilities that generate no credits are the first to be cut. Writing centers—even really good writing centers—have proved no exception (“Idea” 446).

A decade later, North acknowledges that working conditions have gradually improved for writing center people, but maintains that they continue to be viewed, or to believe that they are viewed, as “lower in the pecking order” than classroom teachers—a belief that is reinforced by “differentials in paychecks, workload, or job security” (“Revisiting” 13). For writing center workers themselves, political disadvantage and economic vulnerability can contribute to a “victim” mentality, forming them in the image of the composition instructor Susan Miller describes as “the sad woman in the basement.” The sense of victimization stems largely from the perception that the values animating writing center work are often at odds with the dominant professional values of academe. Accordingly, North cautions that interest and involvement in writing center work may well prove to be a “professional liability” because writing centers are typically isolated from the reaches of professional recognition and reward systems: “Composition itself is suspect enough; writing centers, a kind of obscure backwater, seem no place for a scholar” (“Idea,” 444). In his revised view of writing center work, North continues to caution writing center personnel against “institutional martyrdom” (“Revisiting” 18).

It is precisely the feminized ethos of the writing center that makes
writing center work seem antithetical to scholarship. Scholarship, after all, is the “men’s work” of the academy—conceptualized, as I have argued elsewhere, as a version of the traditionally masculine exploits of exploration, combat, and conquest. Additionally, we must acknowledge that scholarship is the stuff that academic careers are made of. Scholarship as traditionally defined, according to Ernest Boyer, is a currency that holds value beyond the confines of a particular classroom, department, or campus. In the form of faculty publication records, scholarship can facilitate professional mobility, positioning the individual economically and politically in the public sphere of academe. Teaching, on the other hand, and especially teaching of the individualized sort that goes on in many writing centers, is a relatively contained academic activity. In contrast to scholarship, such teaching has the flavor of domesticity, and like the quintessentially domestic, care-giving work of mothering, it is often carried out at a considerable remove from the academy’s systems of economic rewards and political privileges.

**In a Different Light: The Educational Function of Care**

In the emerging feminist articulation of an ethic of care, care is defined as the responsibility of forming connections that promote the well-being of others. In such relationships the self is assumed to be ontologically relational and is therefore enhanced by the connections it establishes with other selves. In this ethical landscape, care becomes a medium of, ideally, mutual exchange, whereby self-interest is blended with the interests of others. By investing in the personhood of others, one’s own personhood is advanced. Because it was originally theorized upon the model of the mother-child relationship, the ethic of care has privileged the concept of maternal nurture as a prototype of caring responsibility. Nurturant activity—directed toward the end of an other’s survival, growth, and social development—thus constitutes the duty—the work—of the caring self.

Joan Tronto’s political analysis of care, however, offers convincing reasons for uncoupling the concepts of caring and maternal nurture in an effort to assert the political and economic value of the sort of care-giving labor that we culturally recognize as “women’s work.” We must, she insists, see care as extending beyond the privatized realm of intimate relationships, and we must learn to see that it is not only children who require care. Rather, we must understand neediness as ontologically basic to the human condition. Typically, those who are most well off are best able to sustain an illusion of autonomy by commanding the caring services of others—a position which Tronto terms “privileged irresponsibility.” An understanding of care derived primarily from the model of maternal care seems to frustrate Tronto’s objective. The obvious asymmetry of power in the mother-child relationship seems to reinforce a cultural belief that neediness is a temporary state of immaturity from which one eventually emerges into autonomous adulthood.
(this, in fact, is the basic Freudian narrative of individuation). Moreover, the extreme physical vulnerability of the infant or young child is likely to cloud our perceptions of the child’s actual and potential social agency. Within the dominant Freudian interpretation, this agency can emerge only through the (boy)child’s resistance and rejection of femininity as represented by the mother.

In examining the writing center’s identity as a feminized site of learning, however, I want to argue that it is useful to trace the ideals of writing center pedagogy to their origins in the cultural ideal of maternal nurture and the important part such nurture plays in the language-learning processes of human beings. Ultimately, in order to achieve a more equitable and productive distribution of care-giving responsibilities in the academy, I concur with Tronto’s assertion that we must de-essentialize and de-gender our conception of care. Care giving, in other words, must be liberated from its limited definition as “women’s work” and must be re-envisioned as a human responsibility. But before we can de-gender our concept of care, we must comprehend and appreciate the “feminine” virtues in which an ethic of care has been grounded historically.

What I am suggesting in the pages that follow is that we must resist formulations of writing center work that are grounded exclusively in the established values of a patriarchal institution, for by choosing to view “women’s work”—in this case, writing center work—from the ideological perspective of the fathers, we are complicitous in its devaluation. To the extent that we reject the possibility that maternal identity contributes to a valid and even desirable academic ideal—one that may legitimately guide the reform and restructuring of the academy itself—we assist in our own disempowerment as writing center workers. A necessary first step toward establishing the academic legitimacy of writing centers as “feminized” worksites whose pedagogical methods have been characterized as “feminist” is recognizing and being able to articulate the centrality of so-called “feminine” patterns of receptivity and response to the teaching and learning of language. And because in our culture it is a historical reality that women, whether mothers or maids, have assumed primary responsibility for the care of young children, guiding them through the prototype experience of oral, first-language acquisition, the maternal figure has come to embody a powerful educational ideal. It is time we paid her due respect.

To be sure, it is risky business to draw parallels between mother-infant bonding and the instructional relationships we establish between ourselves and our students. I have already noted that Susan Miller, for instance, decries the infantalization of composition students through the consignment of composition teachers to the roles of “mothers” and “maids,” and certainly the parallel I am suggesting seems to play directly into the model she condemns. I suspect, however, that an academic aversion to perceiving the teaching
profession in terms of “mothering” derives from two sets of deeply rooted cultural beliefs about maternal function and human learning that we need to reexamine. First, we are inclined, as psychologist Jessica Benjamin explains, to view motherhood as a self-obliterating role in which the maternal self exists solely as a vehicle for the child’s development. Such self-denial is clearly at odds with the professional identity teachers seek to inhabit—an identity that rests upon social recognition earned from peers and superiors who inhabit the reward system, and one which is warranted by the profession of specialized knowledge and skills rather than by the “simple” desire to be of service to others.

A second, related belief is the widely held conviction that maternal nurture is essentially an emotional function, at odds with a rationalist model of intellectual development. This conviction is informed by a dichotomizing tendency that is especially pronounced in the structuring of academic values, the assumption, in Judith Jordan’s words, “that affective arousal necessarily leads to cognitive confusion” (158). Certainly the charge of affective contamination is one to which writing centers and other sites distinguished by close interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are especially vulnerable. Lilia Bartolome, in advocating a student-centered, response-based pedagogy as a means of creating a humanized learning environment, feels obliged to defend this teaching approach as a disciplined and “academically rigorous” pedagogy despite its nurturant ethic. “It is important,” she writes, “not to link teacher respect and use of student knowledge and language bases with a laissez-faire attitude toward teaching” (181).

The sharpest critics of “student centered,” developmental pedagogies, of the sort that typically flourish in writing centers, charge that the shift of focus from the disciplinary content of the curriculum to the psychological development of the learner undermines the intellectual integrity of the academic enterprise. E. D. Hirsch, for instance, suggests that this shift sacrifices rigorous intellectual discipline for emotional affirmation, and charges that twentieth-century schools of education have clothed romantic notions of childhood in the language of developmental psychology (119). An even more scathing indictment comes from Redding Sugg, who describes student-centered instruction based on developmental learning theory as the educational “soft line” promoted by “motherteachers” who forsake academic standards in favor of “humbly and lovingly muddling along with children” (251).

In an effort to dispel these common misconceptions about the limitations of mothering and the nature of human learning processes, I turn now to current child development research that illuminates the intersubjective quality of human learning in general, and of language learning in particular.
Language-learning as Intersubjective Activity: A Developmental Account

Current theories of child development follow Vygotsky’s lead in spotlighting the social foundations of learning by examining the emergence of language in the rhetorical context of the infant’s “first bond,” a term often employed in the literature to describe the relationship between the infant and a responsive primary caregiver. Though this caregiver need not even be the infant’s biological parent, child development specialists have adopted the convention of referring to the fundamental unit of the child’s primary social development in terms of the mother-infant dyad. (Because this convention speaks to my own experience, I continue to follow it here, though ultimately I reject the term’s implication that the child’s social identity necessarily emerges from the relationship with a female parent.) Viewed as a single unit, the dyad represents a “relational self,” a subjectivity defined by interpersonal connectedness that seems directly counter to the autonomous construction of self so highly esteemed in an academic culture that reveres individualism and self-reliance and idealizes the separate self as the end product of maturation and the locus of human agency.

This commonly espoused, linear view of human development that poses the relational infant self as a subjectivity from which one grows out and away conceptualizes infancy and adulthood as opposite polarities, animated by affiliative tendencies on the one hand, and by autonomous urges on the other. But recent studies in developmental psychology are beginning to challenge the popular notion that the infant and the adult must be seen as oppositional constructions of selfhood. “Too often,” writes psychologist Judith Jordan, “relational issues have been phrased in regressive terms, such as merged, symbiotic, undifferentiated, suggesting that intense interpersonal connection involves movement into more primitive functioning” (154). Of particular relevance to educators is the doubt cast by theorists like Jordan on the proposition that relatedness is an anticipatory or immature subjective mode, one in which affective desires for connectedness impair the detached cognitive functioning valorized in the academy and other professional settings.

Undoubtedly, academic discomfort with the suggestion that the relational model of self embodied in the mother-infant dyad applies descriptively to adult as well as infant subjectivity derives largely from the conventional view that this particular model of relatedness represents a frightening imbalance of power. That is, the infant is dependent upon its mother to the extent that maternal identity subsumes the infant self entirely. Maturation thus becomes a process of escape charted by the progressive objectification of the maternal self as a separate other. Jessica Benjamin points out that such a description of human development suffers from a common failure to acknowledge the principle of mutual recognition and responsiveness that is
essential to the concept of intersubjectivity. Denied subjective status, the maternal self becomes a static construct, incapable of her own developmental growth within the bond of the mother-infant relationship. Benjamin writes that an alternative to this view is only now being introduced as a consequence of contemporary feminist perspectives that have “made us aware of the disastrous results for women of being reduced to the mere extension of a two-month-old”:

Psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular too often partake of this distorted view of the mother, which is so deeply embedded in the culture as a whole. No psychological theory has adequately articulated the mother’s independent existence. Thus, even the accounts of the mother-infant relationship which do consider parental responsiveness always revert to the view of the mother as the baby’s vehicle for growth, an object of the baby’s needs (171).

In conceptualizing the mutuality of the maternal-infant relationship, Benjamin employs terms that mirror current constructions of response-based writing instruction and which are brought into especially sharp focus in the one-on-one rhetorical model of teaching and learning that occurs in writing center settings. The developmental process fostered within intersubjective relationships, according to Benjamin, is a matter of learning to recognize and respond to another as a subject in his or her own right. This process is driven by the innate sociability of the human self which Vygotsky recognized in his studies of children’s language learning, the need one has for recognition and affirmation as a subjectivity endowed with social agency. Interestingly, Benjamin chooses to describe this agency in terms of authorship:

A person comes to feel that “I am the doer who does, I am the author of my acts,” by being with another person who recognizes her acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence. Recognition is the essential response, the constant companion of assertion. The subject declares, “I am, I do,” and then waits for the response, “You are, you have done.” Recognition is, thus, reflexive; it includes not only the other’s confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response (170).

It is not the infant alone, however, who seeks confirmative response. Benjamin goes on to explain that response can only be meaningful when it comes from an other possessed of her own will and her own measure of social agency. Such qualities come into play when the mother actively sets boundaries to confine her infant’s will—meeting her infant’s assertions with assertions of her own.
Teaching, Learning, and an Ethic of Care

The coupling of maternal agency with a decision-making process informed by the objectives of nurturant care removes nurture from the realm of exclusively affective response. The recent writings of feminist thinkers such as Nel Noddings, Sara Ruddick, and Madeleine Grumet make important contributions toward reconstructing maternal nurture as an intellectual and ethical function in which affect and cognition are equally present and mutually reinforcing. These writers describe the maternal prototype of the relational self as a subject quite different from the one who goes “humbly and lovingly muddling along with children.” Instead, the relational, maternal self engages in a discipline of maternal care.

While Ruddick and Noddings both begin examining the philosophical concept of the relational self by focusing on the reciprocal intersubjectivity of the mother-infant dyad, both extrapolate broader social and political significance from this interpersonal dynamic. Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* is subtitled *Toward a Politics of Peace*, and Noddings connects her concept of “caring” with moral education through an examination of “pedagogical caring.” In making this connection, Noddings aligns herself with Grumet, whose *Bitter Milk* proposes educational reform based on an ethical stance that grows out of maternal experience. Unifying the separate projects of these three writers, then, is their shared desire to re-position the relational self in society, extending its influence from the private domain of the nursery into the public sphere of education and politics, where it may participate in the “adult” task of shaping social life.

Perhaps nowhere within the institutional structure of the academy has the relational ethic delineated by child development studies and feminist philosophy found so secure a foothold as in the writing center. Here the intersubjective dynamic of recognition and response, the relational self in close connection with another self, is crucial to the successful enactment of a learning process that recognizes “the student’s individuality as the basis for whatever help” the teacher can offer (Harris, “What’s Up” 20). The discipline of individualized instruction performed in the writing center replicates in a public setting the essential elements of the maternal thinking that guides the emergence of the child’s subjectivity within the privatized social environment of the first intimate bond. Accordingly, the discourse of and about writing centers emphasizes the critical nature of mutual recognition and responsiveness in a teacher-student relationship that seeks to affirm the authority and the authorship of the student’s own subjectivity.

Mike Rose, for instance, writing of his teaching experiences in a learning skills center, tells of the “gifted” teacher’s ability to “see beyond failure” to the individual student (2); her ability to stimulate and nurture literate understanding in even the most academically vulnerable of students derives from
her power of recognition, “her refusal to see her students as marginal” (2). This recognition of another human subjectivity, Rose goes on to explain, can occur only in the context of close human relationships that enable the teacher to empathize in some measure with a student’s potentially “other” ways of viewing the world. “If you get close enough,” he explains, “you’ll find knowledge the assignment didn’t tap, ineffective rules and strategies that have a logic of their own” (8). Pedagogical recognition, in Rose’s scenario, also implies emotional involvement. “Teaching,” he insists, is “a kind of romance” in which knowledge acquires meaning “through a touch on the shoulder, through a conversation…” (102).

The behavioral manifestation of recognition is response. Brannon and Knoblauch write that writing center tutors share with classroom teachers the responsibility of responding to what they recognize in their students’ writing. Like the classroom teacher, the tutor is “preeminently a reader whose informed facilitative responses to writers not only provide them with the feedback needed to make more effective choices, but also dramatize for them the nature of writing as a process of making and communicating meaning” (45). Brannon and Knoblauch’s use of the term “feedback” in this passage implies the reciprocal, dialogic relationship that defines the “bond” ideally established between tutor and student. Tilly and John Warnock accordingly construct an ideal of reciprocal response which, like Benjamin’s insistence that we recognize the subjective integrity of the mother in the mother-infant dyad, preserves the subjectivity of the tutor as an individual who, like the student, retains the capacity for continued social and intellectual growth in a context of intersubjective relatedness. The teachers in the “liberatory writing center” described by the Warnocks are “students in their attitudes,” willing to “honor their own ignorance” (20). Ideally, as a consequence of this reciprocal responsiveness, learning is a negotiating process in which teacher and student are mutually engaged: “Students and staff are both writers, confronting the same kinds of problems; students and staff are allies. They both develop critical consciousness, the capacity to entertain seriously each other’s viewpoint, confident that other views can be accepted, rejected, or modified” (21).

Admittedly, the passages I have cited above describe a pedagogical ideal that is not always achieved in the actual pedagogical practices of writing centers. Meg Woolbright’s case study of a writing center tutorial session demonstrates how easily the “feminist” or “maternal” values of “community, communication, equality and mutual nurturance” (171) may be compromised when writing center workers submit, albeit reluctantly, to institutional pressures that shape them as spokespersons for the reigning values of the hierarchically ordered academy. Woolbright’s study reveals how within a patriarchal institution, nurturant values may be regarded as an ineffective substitute for discipline in the task of promoting academic survival. By the
same token, the ideals of maternal nurture that emerge from the child-
development theories and philosophical explorations I have called upon do
not perfectly mirror the reality of parent-child relations. As descriptive
models of human experience, they are bound to leave us disappointed in
ourselves. Certainly this is true for me as I reflect upon my own experiences
as both a mother and a teacher. There have been times when I have refused
or been unable to recognize my children or my students, when I have failed
to respond to them or have responded in a careless or inauthentic fashion.
Just as frequently I have been disappointed by my children’s and my students’
failure to recognize me or to provide me with responses that have affirmed my
own still-developing sense of self. But it is important, I believe, to recognize
and appreciate ideals for what they are and what they can do for us—that is,
to provide us with goals that guide our decisions as we perform the disciplines
of working and living.

All too often, I believe, the ideal of maternal nurture has been distorted
by our deeply embedded cultural distrust of relational knowledge and
authority because of the singularly feminine cast it acquires in a patriarchal
culture that values masculine independence above all else. This distrust
seems especially potent in the academic community, where our work is
structured by traditions that until the present century have reflected only
men’s ways of knowing and thinking about the self and others. Even in the
recent history of the academy, as the gender balance of the institution has
begun to approach equilibrium, a perspective based in maternal or otherwise
feminine experience has done little to recognize and respond to the maternal
voices in our midst. In the context of our professional lives, we academics
tend to subscribe to the view that maternal nurturing—because it does not
conform to the profile of professional wage-earning work—is neither an ideal
to aspire to nor a self-affirming choice, but rather, as Eleanor Kuykendall
suggests, “a culturally imposed task,” and thus “an aspect of women’s
oppression in which women become merely mothers” (263).

I suspect that the writing center has succeeded in nurturing an ideal of
maternal subjectivity largely because it has developed from a marginal
position in the “obscure backwater” (North 444) of the academic structure.
Although such a position has historically contributed to the vulnerability of
writing center personnel, it has also enabled writing centers to remain
relatively untouched by the anti-maternal influences of the academic hierar-
chy. Perhaps it is largely the protective obscurity in which writing centers
have come of age that has enabled them to remain sites where the ideal of the
relational self can be kept alive and from which one can imagine a “perfect
world” where “all writers would have their own ready auditor. . . who would
not only listen but draw them out, ask them questions they would not think
to ask themselves” (North 440).

But it is a betrayal of ideals to confine them to an obscure backwater,
content to merely “imagine” their extension into the surrounding world. After all, the “safe place” pedagogy characteristic of many writing centers implies an unsafe or hostile world beyond. While writing center workers strive to create a site that promotes literate language learning through a nurturant pattern of respectful recognition and response, the power of this approach may be neutralized by the disjuncture between this pedagogy and the educational experiences students can expect to encounter beyond the writing center’s walls. It may not be enough for writing centers to simply fortify student writers against the slings and arrows of academic life. Indeed, as Sara Ruddick has suggested, genuine commitment to an ethic of care may dictate activism on behalf of a “politics of peace.” If writing center workers do indeed occupy and value an ethos that can be characterized at least in part as “maternal,” they must question the extent to which their position is institutionally fashioned as a service to patriarchal values and an ethic of competition that excludes the possibility of cooperation and collaborative learning—a politics of war rather than peace. If truly committed to a “maternal” model of pedagogical reform, we who work in writing centers and similar sites of academic support to students must question the ethics of arming students to fight the good fight when they leave our domain. An alternative conceptualization of our professional obligation is to question the very need for slings and arrows in the first place. To be politically viable, writing centers must go beyond imagining a perfect world to take up the work of helping to build that world without compromising the nurturant values writing center work upholds. As Barbara Cambridge concludes from her reading of *Bitter Milk*, “In moving to the public sphere we need not forego the nurturing which feeds change; indeed, it’s only the interplay of the private and the public that creates new life” (79-80).

In accepting the challenge of promoting this interplay of public and private life, writing center workers are positioned to extend the philosophical project of liberating the relational self from the confines of the home, freeing this version of the self to exert its agency in the public sphere of the academic workplace. By insisting upon the value of a nurturant, relational ethos in the enterprise of teaching as well as parenting and other privatized forms of care giving, writing centers have already done much to advance this project in the realm of pedagogy. But as Gerald Graff reminds us, teaching itself typically transpires in a relatively contained academic site. The pedagogical space of the classroom or writing center is frequently regarded as the teacher’s own kingdom, closed to the view of the world beyond its walls. Graff faults the containment of teaching for the lack of continuity and coherence that beset the curriculum at many institutions. But it is also true that the containment of pedagogy in the classroom or writing center, like the historical containment of women in the home, isolates teachers from the political economy of academe and promotes the silencing of teaching voices in an institution
where, as Ernest Boyer has observed, scholarly publication is the current coin of the realm, while teaching functions "like a currency that has value in its own country but can't be converted into other currencies" (37).

It is not enough, then, that the relational self should create isolated "safe places," feminized havens in a historically masculine institution that is content to replicate the private/public split in its own political structure. It is not enough, in other words, to work for the transformation of pedagogical ideals without similarly exerting ourselves to transform conventional views of scholarship, for despite the traditional division of academic labor along these lines, both teaching and scholarship participate in the central academic project of discovering and extending knowledge. It would be unfortunate indeed if the so-called feminization of teaching simply reinforced a dichotomy that aligns a feminine ethos with teaching and a masculine ethos with scholarship. Such a system holds little hope for those of us who are struggling to discover a unified academic self. A revised notion of scholarship, one sufficiently broad to encompass the participation of teaching and research jointly in the discovery and extension of knowledge, might proceed along paths already being traced by organizations such as the Carnegie Foundation and the American Association of Higher Education.

Additionally, the assertion of relational self in the most conspicuously public realm of scholarship—published scholarly prose—challenges the reign of an authorial stance of objective detachment in academic writing. This masculine-derived tradition of scholarship grounded in the practice of rational, disinterested argument foregrounds positions rather than human subjects. To this tradition, writing center workers bring a principled interest in the persons who animate those subject positions. Firmly rooted in a pedagogy that theorizes learning as a social, interdependent process through which human selves develop in relationships with other selves, the scholarship that emerges from writing centers and other "feminized" sites in the academy suggests that knowledge results from a process of recognition and identification as well as from opposition—from a process of mutual advocacy as well as from the construction of adversarial positions.

Believing as we do in the inherent worth of our pedagogy, writing center workers and indeed compositionists as a whole must take steps to deconstruct the ethical boundaries that confine and isolate writing centers and composition programs within institutional structures that define them as "other." In concrete terms, this entails not so much a "feminizing" of scholarship, but a "personalizing" of scholarly inquiry along the lines pursued by feminist scholars who insist upon an explicit acknowledgment of the socially situated nature of all observation—an acknowledgment that all discovery and construction of knowledge proceeds from a socially constructed and constructing subject who draws his or her identity from relatedness to other selves. Undertaking this reform calls into question the academic mythology of the
rational, autonomous self and points to a future where we can share both the riches and the responsibilities of our work with academic colleagues beyond the writing center walls. By working to extend an ethic of care into our institutions and the world they serve, we can actively participate in the project of establishing a more “perfect world” where our identities as caring individuals and serious professionals join forces as equals in the human quest for a unified self.

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