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Real Men Don't Do Writing Centers

Margaret O. Tipper

Let me start right off with a disclaimer, because part of me is very skeptical about what I say here. Talking about “men” and “boys” makes me uncomfortable. I do not like stereotypes. I am not a sociologist who talks about people as groups. I am, rather, an English teacher and a writer who is concerned with characters. And characters, whether female or male, flow out along a wide continuum of behavior, which seems only at its stereotypic worst to be gender-based.

That said, I also know quite certainly that there are times when I shake my head and bemoan some “guy thing” at Gilman, the boys’ school where I teach, that I know I will never appreciate or even begin to understand. So, I am going ahead with this analysis of the ways in which the structure and practice of writing centers may be uncomfortable, difficult, even anathema to many boys and young men. I hope such an analysis may help me understand why, after almost six years of building a highly respected writing center in the high school at Gilman, our use is still hovering at about one-third capacity.

My first reaction to under-utilization was to push the Writing Center on those reluctant boys who did not know what was good for them: better PR, allowing teachers to require attendance, greater visibility. I also have tried to change the boys’ behavior: make them more willing to ask for help, better at planning ahead, more internally motivated. It has taken me longer than I like to admit to realize that rather than trying to change the boys, perhaps we should try changing some of our practices in the Writing Center, perhaps we have been too much lace and not enough locker room.

So, I have begun reading about boys and men—what they are like, and how they learn—and about writing centers—particularly the ways in which we are very feminized places. The researchers’ observations and some of my own may invite us to reflect a bit on the practices we adhere

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to in writing center work, and to examine implications for boys and young men.

Skills and the Tribe

Apparently, though guys usually have good muscles, there is a critical one less developed than it is in girls and women. This *corpus collosum* connects the two halves of the brain, and through it we do the processing for verbal skills—reading and writing—and for relational skills—reading and generating social and emotional cues (Gurian). So, it seems that right out of the starting gate, we have stacked the deck in writing centers against the guys. Reading, writing, sitting down and talking: these activities probably would not appear on most guys' list of top ten ways to spend an afternoon.

Oh, but you say, there are plenty of guys who do like to do those things and are good at them. That is true. But they are not “real men.” They know it, and the other, real men know it—which brings us to the tribe. Men and women alike want to feel like they belong somewhere, that they are part of a tribe. But for boys especially, who seem very big on independence, belonging to the tribe is essential (Keen). So, for these guys who like to read and write and talk, the writing center is their tribal haven.

Don't get me wrong, we have lots of real men on our staff—football players, wrestlers—and they come, do a good job, write up their reports, and leave. But, for the staff who hang out in the Center all the time, drink coffee with lots of sugar, carry on “conversations” with their fellow consultants in the Writing Center journal, write poems on the blackboard, do literary trivia, and talk about books, for the guys whose best talents lie in that stuff at which girls are usually better, we are their tribe.

Now, the fact that these literary guys have a tribe at a boys' school is a good thing, but I also worry that it does nothing but cement our reputation as a place that real men better not do. I once overheard a student on his way up the stairs to the Writing Center say, “I'm going up to see the poetry girls.” Perhaps he was talking about my female associate and me; perhaps the dig went deeper to include the male student poets who work with me.

I am afraid that there are many obvious and subtle ways in which we create and reinforce the “feminizing” of our writing centers, the term used by Lisa Birnbaum in her article, entitled “Toward a Gender-Balanced Staff in the Writing Center.” Birnbaum expresses concerns about the fact that most of her tutors are women and that her selection of tutors is influenced by a preference for tutoring approaches which are more stereotypically feminine. Formo and Welsh report that “Perhaps the most

common metaphor used in describing writing instructors is that of mother (one which is not surprising considering that 65-70% of composition instructors are women)" (108). The article immediately following theirs in *Writing Center Perspectives* is entitled "Giving Birth to Voice: The Professional Writing Tutor as Midwife" (Rabuck).

Perhaps more disturbing than this self-realization about our feminization is what we are proposing to do about it. In her article "Rearticulating the Writing Center," Nancy Grimm observes that the remedial legacy of many writing centers has left us subservient to the academy, in a relationship which mirrors that of the traditional wife. Calling writing centers "handmaidens," Grimm says, citing Trachsel and others, "they are marked by social notions of what women provide—refuge, nurturance, emotional support, personal guidance" (524). Grimm concludes her analysis by urging that we strive to transform our institutions by communicating from the borders the realities of life for the marginalized (546). Similarly, having affirmed the "women's work" of the writing center, despite its being "soft" and separate, Mary Trachsel argues in her "Nurturant Ethics and Academic Ideals: Convergence in the Writing Center" that it is precisely these nurturing, caring qualities which may transform the academy. I agree that it is beneficial to everyone in institutions to look for ways in which to break what William Pollock calls "the Boy Code," that strict set of rules for behavior that straightjackets young men into stereotypical ways of being male. However, it also is important to examine how these images of writing centers reflect and define the way others perceive us and to ask ourselves a most important question: If the writing center reflects qualities of a distinctly feminine tribe, then what does that say to the young men who belong and to those who do not?

Images of Independence and Success

While guys seem to prefer not to really need anyone else, they also like to be depended on. So we get this hero/cowboy thing going where the guy lives life on his own (or maybe with his horse) but also manages to take care of a few people who need his help along the way. We get the self-sufficient protector/provider father, going off into the world alone and either conquering the enemy or bringing home the bacon—perhaps both.

So, how does this independence ethic play in the writing center? At my school, many guys do not want to use the Writing Center: they do not need any help with writing their papers, thank you very much. For men, according to Deborah Tannen, needing help is a sign of weakness. Similarly, Steve Sherwood asserts that receiving help puts one in a lower status position relative to the helper and signals dependency. At Gilman,

our consistently low Writing Center use over five years of operation makes us realize how strong these stereotypic associations are. In ironic contrast, the boys are eager to provide help for anyone else who might need it. As a result, we have had no voluntary attrition of consultants, and almost everyone who is nominated to be a consultant accepts.

Our problem with getting the boys to come to the Writing Center as clients also may be explained by differences in attitudes towards success and failure. Research suggests that men attribute success to their own efforts and abilities, and failure to bad luck and difficulties with the task. Women tend to just the opposite explanations (Steinberg). Therefore, any self-respecting boy knows that he has succeeded in writing a good paper because he is smart and has worked hard, not because he has received help in the Writing Center. A poor grade, however, rests in the hard assignment, the strict standards of the teacher, the bad timing of the deadline—but clearly not in **his** failure to go to the Writing Center.

We need to work especially hard in our classrooms to create conditions where boys experience the joy and the benefits of receiving help, of the reciprocity in the helping relationship, of the balance of factors that add up to success. I say “experience” because this is not something that they will simply believe because we tell them it is so. Such a suggestion follows the hope of Grimm, Trachsel, and others who want writing center ethics to positively affect schools and the people in them. To do so with boys, we need to adjust some of our practices in the writing center to be more in line with their cultural characteristics. For example, I have modified my original policies of self-referral only and now allow teachers to require that entire classes come to the Center for help with an assignment. The boys grumble, but they come.

Concrete Solutions and Results

When I tell my husband about a problem with a colleague at school, he is much more likely to say, “They should fire that incompetent bastard!” than “Oh, honey, you must be so frustrated!” Guys seem to see help (both that which they give and that which they receive) as concrete (Farrell). Guys like action. They can relate to it. They understand how it works. Such a response becomes a problem in the Writing Center for our male clients and consultants.

The nondirective style, which has reached the level of icon in writing center practice, seems counter-intuitive for many male consultants who desperately long to just get in there and fix up a client’s paper. Similarly, other teachers and I often hear the complaint from the boys that their Writing Center consultant did not “do enough.” The boys do not

understand the kind of help they receive when their questions are answered with questions. They do not recognize as help the process of learning to do for themselves. Instead, they are frustrated that they have wasted their time with something that neither seemed to help as it was happening nor (as is true in many cases where advice is not taken) improved their grade.

The grade is another incarnation of this preoccupation with the concrete. For all students, but especially for boys who like quick gratification, grades are the measure of worth in the academic world. Therefore, if the Writing Center conference is not graded and did not measurably improve the grade on the paper, well, the student may say that going to the Writing Center was helpful to appease his teacher, but the bottom line is—it was a waste of time!

At Gilman, we have made some modifications because of these dynamics. Our first day of tutor training is at an outdoor education center where our entire focus is on “the dynamics of help.” The motto for the day is “involve, not solve.” Through the team-building activities and physical challenges in which they are forced into both giving and receiving help, the boys “get” something which I used to talk about in training *ad nauseum*, and they would still look at me like I was from another planet. Another change is that our consultants now do supervised writing time in conferences. For example, rather than letting the client walk away with the advice to “smooth out the transitions,” the client will actually spend time in the conference room or at a computer, writing transitions for his paper and running them by the consultant. Now clients are leaving with more concrete “help,” even though they have made the revisions themselves. A few teachers have succumbed to giving instant gratification in the form of extra credit points on the paper for a Writing Center visit.

Competition

Is it too obvious to say that boys are competitive? Is it too much of a stretch to go as far as Sam Keen who says that boys and men carry in their gender history a “warrior psyche”? Keen describes some of the accompanying qualities as: a preference for action over reflection, an experience of the “other” as either a rival or a comrade against a common enemy, a tendency to black and white thinking (right and wrong), a concern with rank and hierarchy in relationships, and a preference for groups rather than one-to-one situations (35).

We consciously have taken writing centers out of the competitive academic mainstream and have made them places for cooperation. We do not grade either tutors or clients. We have made our conference rooms

places of reflection rather than action. Students work one-to-one as peers, as equals. And we reject the idea that there is one right way to approach the writing task. Whoa! Is it not possible that a boy going into a room like that might not feel like a cat getting thrown into a swimming pool?

I look at some of the “dysfunction” we identify in conferences and, all of a sudden, the situations make sense. Might the student who tries to enlist the tutor as an ally against the teacher or who gets into a power struggle with the tutor just be trying to create relationships that make sense to him? Might the boy who insists on the tutor telling him what is “right” just be functioning out of his ancient warrior psyche and thinking, “This guy is supposed to be on my side; therefore, he must know what is right.”?

We have made some changes at Gilman because we have thought about these particular characteristics. Our changes seems to be supported by Kathleen Hunzer’s examination of how clients’ attitudes towards male and female tutors are based on stereotypes, with male students preferring male tutors whom they perceive to be more authoritative, task oriented, and efficient, and female students preferring female tutors whom they experience as more understanding and caring, easier to trust and talk to.

We have not made the Writing Center competitive; however, we do offer some small group sessions, usually in connection with classes. Adams and Adams advocate this method, adapted from creative writing workshops, as preferable to the “one-to-one tutorial sessions [which] replay the teacher-student office conference” (23). Along those lines, another evolution in our practice at Gilman is that the consultant, while a fellow student, is not, in this context, an equal. There is the expectation, by students and faculty alike, of expertise. At our school, where standards and expectations are high, and where students take quite a bit of leadership responsibility around the school, students are used to situations in which they are not equal to their peers. The Writing Center consultants most often do know more about good writing and how to produce it than their clients do, and they are encouraged to teach what they know as best they can, without being overly concerned with what Deborah Tannen calls “the appearance of similarity and equal status” (67). Most of the time, the boys and the faculty like this arrangement. I too prefer it to the pseudo-equal stance. As Richard Hawley says of the boys whom he has taught and observed as headmaster at the University School in Cleveland, they have “extraordinary authenticity” (55) and, as our headmaster at Gilman, Arch Montgomery, says, “Boys can spot a phony.”

If we have indeed, unwittingly, and with the best of intentions, created writing centers as feminine places with practices which feel distinctly uncomfortable or even alien to boys and young men, let us discover and admit that. Such a discovery is particularly important in light of the facts that by the time they reach high school, boys have more writing

difficulties than girls, are more often assigned to special education classes, are more likely to repeat a grade, to be suspended, and, most frightening, to commit suicide (Pollock). Statistics such as these lead William Pollock to conclude that “the very structure of most coed schools tends unwittingly to favor female students” (239).

Let us first simply collect some statistics about how many of our directors, tutors, and clients are male and ask whether we have an under-served population to address. Let us hold our sacred practices up to scrutiny and systematically research whether nondirective tutoring serves boys as well as girls; whether group critiques prove to be positive vehicles for response to writing, especially for boys; whether external motivation and competition improve writing center use and success in terms of improved writing among our young men. And then, based on what we learn from this research, we can hold ourselves to the same rigorous revision which we urge on our best writers.

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