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Censoring Students, Censoring Ourselves: Constraining Conversations in the Writing Center

Steve Sherwood

A few years ago, a student writer came to our Writing Center with a freshman composition paper he planned to present aloud to his class the next day. The paper began, “To me, the biggest turnoff in the world is a woman with a briefcase in her hand.” I interrupted him to observe, “You must get turned off a lot.” The student nodded and went on reading. Predictably, the essay contended that women should be “barefoot and pregnant” and had no legitimate social role outside the home. As I listened, I reflected that in my professional life, I’d never held a job in which women were not my co-workers and, quite often, my bosses. At the time, my wife was home for a two-month maternity leave with our second child, and would be returning to work soon, for which our joint bank account and I were grateful. Not only did I disagree with the sentiments the student writer expressed, but I also took offense at his assumption that, being male, I must agree with him. And I suspected that my reaction would be mild compared to that of his female instructor and fellow students (he was one of eight males in a class of twenty-seven), who the next day would quite likely have him for lunch. “You’re writing this for an audience of young women, most of whom probably plan to have careers,” I observed. “What do you think they’ll say?” He said he didn’t really care what they thought. When I suggested he might want to reconsider making sexist statements that would only reflect badly on him, he said, “I’m supposed to write an argumentative paper. These are my opinions, and I have the right—as an American—to say what I please. No one has a right to tell me what I can and can’t say, including my teacher and including you.”

As a former journalist, my first impulse when confronted with issues of free speech is to take a strict libertarian view of the First Amendment, which in this case would mean admitting that the student had

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a constitutionally protected right to voice his opinions, unenlightened as they were. Like Jeanne Simpson, I believe that

If as educators we do not abide by the First Amendment, if we believe some speech is more equal than other, then all our trumpeting about “academic freedom” is hypocritical rot. The point of the First Amendment is that all ideas will be heard and that the right of the public to make their own judgments will remain unimpaired. (Pemberton 15)

As a teacher of composition, however, bound by National Council of Teachers of English tenets prohibiting sexist speech, I’m caught between this libertarian view and practical concerns about classroom conduct, good manners, and the fostering of community among students—which sexist, racist, offensive, or profane speech tends to disrupt. Already philosophically conflicted, then, I felt appalled at the writer’s clear implication that by urging him to avoid sexist statements I was trying to censor him.

At first glance, it seems absurd to talk about censorship in the writing center because it implies that writing consultants have more power than they actually do. The greater influence a person has over a student writer’s life (through grades or approval), the more potential there is for censorship or applying the pressure to self-censor. Therefore, teachers, bosses, parents, friends, and significant others probably have more opportunity to censor students than we do. Besides, students come to us voluntarily, seeking advice, and we have an obligation to advise them. Principled tutors would not deliberately exercise oppressive authority. Most of us would sooner censor ourselves—refusing to reveal our opinions on issues for fear of being too directive—than censor a student writer. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, though, defines the term *censor* as, first, the title of Ancient Roman officials who ““had the responsibility of the supervision of public morals”” and, second, as officials of other cultures ““whose duty it is to inspect all books, journals, dramatic pieces, etc., before publication, to insure that they shall contain nothing immoral, heretical, or offensive”” (qtd. in Jansen 14). So, to the extent that I tried to influence the moral aspects of the student’s writing, prior to publication, perhaps I was acting as a censor.

Based on this experience and others like it, I would argue that, perhaps inadvertently, many of us who work in writing centers practice a form of censorship as part of our everyday duties. For the most part, we censor or urge self-censorship in the interest of helping students adjust to and succeed in the academic world. We want to protect students from the practical and political effects of their words. We want to show them that their opinions have consequences, that using sexist or racist terms,

espousing particular political causes, speaking carelessly on topics they don't fully understand, and offending their audiences can cost them good grades and the esteem of their teachers and fellow students. Sometimes the safe path is the right one, especially if taking it prevents the expression of absurd, rash, or poisonous sentiments that would only hurt or embarrass the writer and others.

However, by encouraging self-censorship in the early stages of composition, we may prevent student writers from fully developing and expressing valid and valuable ideas and opinions. Often, seeing us as authority figures, students are only too eager to follow our advice. Or, uncertain about the worth of their ideas and unwilling to risk criticism, they censor themselves. One ethical quandary we face in advising student writers to suppress controversial or unconventional ideas is that, in spite of all our experience as writers and tutors, we may be guilty of misjudgment. Another quandary comes when we play an ostensibly objective devil's advocate role while responding to student papers but in reality are anything but objective. Perhaps the most perplexing quandary of all, though, comes in confronting offensive speech like that used by the student with the briefcase-fixation. In such cases, by attempting to preserve cherished ideals of equality, civility, and harmony among the sexes and races, we may be asking or coercing students like him to give up their First Amendment rights to free speech and expression.

There are times, of course, when urging self-censorship is almost without question in the writer's best interest. We don't want students to come across as arrogant, naïve, preachy, or wrongheaded. So, depending on the specific purpose of a piece of writing, we may ask them to excise portions of their opinions or style that come closest to revealing who they are. Recently, for example, a student came to me for help with a letter of application to Harvard. The letter began, "Greetings!" It was full of witticisms, asides, and winks. At one point, he told the admissions officers that if they found the letter too formal, he would try to be funnier the next time. In parentheses, he added, "By the way that's a joke." When I suggested he take a more formal tone, he objected, saying he wanted to be sure his personality came across on the page. As kindly as I could, I told him I didn't think that was such a good idea. By convincing him to cut the most conspicuous bits of humor from his letter, I may have prevented him from standing out in a way that would have won him a place at Harvard. Even so, the student's best course appeared to lie along a more conventional path, and I led him there out of concern that his audience of admissions officers might find his tone inappropriate and hold it against him.

Although I feel reasonably confident in this bit of advice, what bothers me is how often (in the name of propriety, convention, or audience awareness) I may have encouraged students to write in ways I believed

their professors would find more appropriate. By urging them to play it safe, I may have discouraged them from taking the kinds of personal and rhetorical risks that could have led to important insights and interesting pieces of writing. This possibility struck me a few semesters ago when one of my own composition students wrote a parody of an individual conference with me. The parody poked fun at my scraggly beard and large belly, and implied that my vaunted open-mindedness was fraudulent. It also portrayed me in false and unflattering ways—for instance, as succumbing to sudden, explosive bouts of flatulence and taking hits from a hip flask. As it happened, the student ambushed me by reading the piece aloud to the class during a workshop session. The reading was a bold move, calculated to test my dedication to the open marketplace of ideas. She was daring me to censor her—to hold the paper against her—and she judged correctly that I wouldn't do it. The parody was inventive, funny, well written, and relevant to the topic we were discussing (the theories of humor). It was the first piece of creative writing she had done and included a perceptive analysis of how parodies work as well as an analysis of the risks she took by presenting it. The other students understood the joke, and the risks, and they watched my face closely. At least in part out of embarrassment, I laughed along with them. The paper was by far the best work the student writer had done all semester, and I believe that writing it taught her, among other lessons, the value of being so committed to an idea that she was willing to risk disapproval in order to express it.

But what would I say if she came to the Writing Center for help with such a paper about another professor? Chances are I would have warned her that the professor might find the piece highly offensive and, because of fictitious and defamatory details like the hip flask, grounds for a libel suit. I would have urged her to switch topics or at least talk the paper over with her professor before presenting it. In plainer words, for her own good, I would have urged her to censor herself—to cringe from writing her only “A” paper of the semester.

Depending on her level of self-confidence and determination, she might have disregarded my warning and held to her vision. Unlike the young man who aggressively defended his concepts about women, however, most of the students who come to the writing center are eager to learn how to make their papers more acceptable to their professors. And we can assume that in the face of disapproval, they will give in to the pressure to self-censor. After all, Mark Twain did. Literary critics suggest that Olivia Clemens and novelist William Dean Howells acted as Twain's chief editors and censors, purportedly to protect him from the worst of his literary excesses. Torn between a need to express his heretical views on Christianity and his need for Olivia's and Howell's approval, torn between his urge to morally shock his readers and his need for money and popularity, Twain frequently held his pen in check. Like a student coming

to the writing center, Twain sought input from those he hoped could help to refine his writing. It is debatable whether Olivia and Howells (by helping Twain conform to the ideological constraints of Victorian society) ultimately did Twain and American literature more harm than good. It is also debatable, as Nancy Grimm points out, whether writing center tutors do more harm than good by “helping students conform to the regulatory power that resides in assignments, testing, and grading practices” (8).

Grimm contends that, whether they realize it or not, tutors typically act as enforcers of the dominant culture’s model of academic literacy. Too often, our conception of what good writing looks like rests on a “fixed notion of literacy, a singular standard” (22) that discourages diversity and independent thinking. Grimm calls on those in the academy to accept diverse definitions of literacy and suggests that writing centers can help by resisting their regulatory role. She urges the adoption of a tutoring practice that “does not seek to suture, to close down understanding, but instead to maintain openness” (22). As she says,

If writing centers support the idea that literacy is singular . . . and the idea that those who depart from a singular standard of literacy can be “fixed” by assigning them to the writing center, then they contribute to closing the system to difference. (22)

I suspect most of us would claim that we do not support this singular notion of literacy, that we are in fact open to diversity. In practice, though, we may tend to be less than open-minded. Instead, urging students to open *their* minds, we play the devil’s advocate, challenging the points of their arguments, calling their ideas, ideals, and lines of reasoning into question. In a 1989 *Writing Center Journal* article, Stacey Freed examines the issue of subjectivity in the tutorial and says, “We would be doing the students a disservice by not voicing our own opinions, forcing them to scrutinize their work” (40). As Freed says,

We deal with fragile egos, underdeveloped thoughts, unfulfilled promises, and yes, we must not let our opinions get in our way. But 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—without being judgmental—in expressing these views. (42-43)

Freed argues responsibly, but the problem is that as human beings

we tend to privilege some ideas and approaches to writing over others, and not always because we're looking out for a student's best interest. And if we're intervening in students' ideas and opinions because they offend our sensibilities or run afoul of our political agendas, then such intervention is probably not ethical and may amount to censorship. As one First Amendment scholar J. M. Balkin points out,

In language strikingly similar to that of antipornography feminists, conservative student groups now claim they are silenced by a left-wing consensus about issues of race, sex, and sexual orientation. Whether the actual phenomenon is overstated or not, the furor over political correctness on university campuses is an excellent example of the American system of private censorship at work. (169)

In an article about working with students who express opinions that writing center tutors find repugnant, Michael Pemberton suggests that in entering into discussions about such opinions, we should view our own motivations with suspicion. As he says, "we rarely seem to tell students to 'think about opposing viewpoints' in conferences when we agree with what they have to say. Most often, we only ask them to consider counterarguments when we disagree with a paper's stance and have objections that quickly spring to mind" (15). In the same article, Joan Mullin reports on a discussion of this issue with her peer tutors. She says,

Most evident was our own discomfort—ultimately, that is—with our own readiness to oppress others, silence others, in the same ways that we SAY we object to. That is, we SOUND like it's OK to take away the rights of those who don't agree with us: it was frustrating to find ourselves ready to be as aggressively oppressive as those about whom we complain. (16)

Understandably, our readiness to attack ideas we disagree with is most intense when we're confronted with sexist, homophobic, racist, or other forms of hate speech. Hate speech offends us deeply because of the emotional damage and other harm it can cause its victims. Rodney A. Smolla, a constitutional law professor who specializes in free speech issues, says hate speech is "an abomination, a rape of human dignity" that "should be fought by all citizens of goodwill with all the vigor society can muster" (169). Hate speech presents scholars of First Amendment jurisprudence—and society in general—with perplexing challenges because, as Smolla observes, Americans "hate hate speech as much as we love free speech" (169). However, our disgust with hate speech is not enough, by itself, to justify the widespread abridgement of free speech in our society.

As Smolla points out,

Modern First Amendment jurisprudence will . . . permit regulation of hate speech in only a small number of closely confined circumstances. Sweeping prohibitions on hate speech, patterned on . . . group libel notions . . . are unconstitutional. The only prohibitions likely to be upheld are narrowly drawn restrictions on fighting words that present a clear and present danger of violence, or that [cause] physical injury to persons or property, or illegal discriminatory conduct, or that involve purely “private” speech in a context completely removed from discussion of issues of general or public concern. (167)

There are special settings, including the workplace, public schools, and private university campuses, where the principles of free speech that apply in the open marketplace of ideas are limited. In the workplace, for example, “A racial slur or a verbal sexual advance by a supervisor to an employee is not mere expression of opinion in the general marketplace of discourse” (Smolla 163). Instead, it is an action that violates laws protecting employees from sexual or racial discrimination. Likewise, referring to public elementary and high schools, Smolla says, “A school need not tolerate student speech that is inconsistent with its ‘basic educational mission’” (215). This limitation depends in part on the age of the students, whose First Amendment rights are not equal to those of adults in our society (5). However, Smolla emphasizes that because high school students are in the process of learning to become responsible citizens, they “must still enjoy a very hefty measure of First Amendment freedom—they do not check the Bill of Rights at the schoolhouse door” (64-65).

The same is true of the legally adult students who visit us in the writing center. In fact, most attempts to enforce bans against sexist and racist speech on state university campuses have been found to be unconstitutional, including those that rely on the “fighting words” doctrine, which prohibits speech that “would provoke an immediate breach of the peace” (Balkin 167). A University of Texas policy aimed at disciplining students who aim racial insults at “specific individuals” with the intention of producing “severe emotional distress” (Balkin 168) may be constitutional because it is based on existing tort law. Balkin adds, however, that because this policy covers so narrow a set of circumstances, “it is unlikely to cover many situations of racial harassment. . . . Moreover, by its own terms, the Texas policy does not deal with harassment based on sex or sexual orientation” (168-69).

In view of the complexities and conflicts involved in this issue, those of us working in writing centers would do well to approach hate

speech with caution. In fact, we would do well to approach cautiously all attempts to censor student writing or encourage self-censorship. This need for caution does not mean we must censor our own views entirely or shy away from helping students to understand the sometimes harmful effects their words can have on an audience. Despite her own reservations about how to deal with authors of offensive speech, Stacey Freed feels “obligated to tell these students about other worlds, other ways of seeing, thinking, being” (41). Joan Mullin concludes that “to change the vicious cycle of oppression . . . we need to work on listening, questioning, and teaching—both ourselves and those with whom we work” (16).

By allowing my sexist student writer to leave the Writing Center without engaging him in a calm, well-reasoned discussion about the quality of his ideas, perhaps I missed a chance to effect reform. More importantly, though, I missed a chance to teach him crucial lessons about ethos, about how to support one’s opinions, about the purpose of academic writing, and about the need to give fair consideration to the perspectives and experiences of others. To explain, for instance, that a primary purpose of academic writing is learning and testing ideas, not simply venting opinions one already holds, would likely not constitute censorship. Neither would it hurt to show the student the need to justify his contentions by presenting evidence or logical reasoning, and to then trace the lack of such evidence in his paper. Finally, it’s possible that simply by explaining my own perspective on working women—based on my rather positive experiences with them—I might have prompted the student to reconsider his position.

After all, as a colleague recently pointed out, students who express an unsavory opinion may do so out of naïveté or haste, and might gladly modify the opinion when they understand all of its implications. Not long ago, for example, a young man from New Mexico came for help with a narrative that contained a purportedly humorous anecdote recounted by an older cousin. The young man’s cousin told him about a man in their small town who hired “Wetbacks” to beat his dog, so that it would become a perfect watchdog and growl whenever other “Wetbacks” came near the man’s house. I had several problems with the anecdote, beginning with its racist content, and I felt obligated to express them. As I told the student, I didn’t find the anecdote funny and as a reader it left me with a bad impression of his cousin. “Is that what you intended for the reader to feel?” I asked. When he said no, I told him that when his persona failed to react to, or reflect on, the anecdote, I wondered about his own position on the joke. Did he approve or disapprove of it? Did it affect him at all? The student, who looked appalled, said he was simply reporting what happened and hadn’t considered any of these issues.

At the time, I wanted him to realize how readers might react to the anecdote, especially since, as I pointed out, it had little to do with the

central theme of his narrative, which was how teens cope with boredom in small towns. The student appeared to understand and accept these objections—at least he did not suggest I was trying to censor him. Suppose, however, that after our calm, logical discussion of audience and rhetorical case building—and my attempts to raise the student’s awareness “about other worlds, other ways of seeing, thinking, being” (Freed 41)—he said he fully understood the racist nature of his cousin’s joke and had no intention of changing a word. In making a more determined effort to persuade him to self-censor (in telling him, “You simply can’t say things like this”), would I be infringing on his First Amendment rights? As I hope I’ve shown, there’s a good chance I would. However, the answer to this question—and whether such infringement is appropriate—will vary with the circumstances that surround each case. Ultimately, then, in deciding whether to urge self-censorship, we must balance the harm students’ words might do, to themselves and their audiences, against our respect for their right to hold and express even the most aberrant of opinions. And, I would argue, whatever scale we use in helping us make such a delicate judgment must be heavily weighted on the side of the students’ best interests and away from our own political or ideological agendas.

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