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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1446

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Peer Tutoring and Gorgias: Acknowledging Aggression in the Writing Center

Julie A. Bokser

The problems of peerness in writing center tutoring have been debated in our literature. John Trimbur points out the apparent contradiction between peer, which implies co-learning, and tutor, which implies hierarchical relations of didactic teaching. Linda Shamoon and Deborah Burns consider the ways in which their own significant writing experiences violated all principles of peer tutoring, and in its place they offer the musician’s “master class” as a positive model for emulative, directive tutoring (140). Andrea Lunsford talks about how a given institutional structure locates control over “truth”—in the tutor, student, or in a negotiation between the two—and she implies that a peer relationship between tutor and student will be more easily enacted in some institutional structures than in others. Peter Vandenberg discusses the inevitable crumbling of a “hierarchy-free ‘collaboration’ of equal peers” in any writing center, since various forms of institutional authority necessarily make students “unequal” (74, 77). These essays help to characterize peer tutoring by critiquing it, and also identify problems in the peer tutoring dynamic. I would like to continue this discussion by underscoring a typically unacknowledged component: the way in which an emphasis on “peerness” disguises the inherent aggression in tutoring relationships.

Words like peer (and our efforts to walk such talk) attempt to evade the fact that that power is never absent from a rhetorical circumstance, and it is to our detriment to believe it might be. In the highly charged rhetorical situations of writing and learning which our writing center conferences comprise, the potentially aggressive relationship between tutor and student is dangerously obscured by an egalitarian pose of peerness. Peerness, in fact, is a complicated relation that involves power and aggression as well as equality. Although we have now begun to talk about the power inherent in the peer relationship, we seldom express this in terms of aggression because we want to avoid the negative connotations of this term. It is this negative potential I propose to examine.
When the word *aggression* occasionally appears in discussions of writing pedagogy, it is unexpected and disconcerting. David Bartholomae uses it in a sentence that makes me pause each time I read his "Inventing the University." Considering an assignment such as "Describe baseball to a Martian," he says the following:

Exercises such as these allow students to imagine the needs and goals of a reader and they bring those needs and goals forward as a dominant constraint in the construction of an essay. And they argue, implicitly, what is generally true about writing—that it is *an act of aggression disguised as an act of charity*. What they fail to address is the central problem of academic writing, where students must assume the right of speaking to someone who knows Pittsburgh or "To His Coy Mistress" better than they do, a reader for whom the general commonplaces and the readily available utterances about a subject are inadequate. (Bartholomae 277; my emphasis)

*Writing is an act of aggression disguised as an act of charity.* This is a startling statement which I and my students have struggled to comprehend. Sometimes our solution is that the assignments Bartholomae discusses highlight the constrictions imposed by an audience—what can and cannot be said to a given reader, such as a Martian, someone who just will not get it without a lot of "helpful" prompting. The "can't-be-said" must be rephrased in acceptable terms, recasting an aggressive relation to a recalcitrant reader as peaceful and caring (the word in which charity finds its roots). What was aggression and disharmony becomes, through apparent charity, alignment, via the "Aha!" of comprehension. Those who were opposed become aligned—the Martian is won over—the militarism of these terms reflects the combative reality of persuasive circumstances.

At other moments we look for clues in Bartholomae’s title, which indicates that to him *invention* is the crucial writing “stage,” if only because it occurs at all stages. Writers invent ways of discussing ideas, stances to take, and audiences to listen at every step in the writing process. Invention is not coming up with original ideas no one has yet thought of, but rather, creating a position and something to say within a rule-governed conversation already taking place. To invent, as Bartholomae says, is to “assume the right of speaking” (277). And because of this, invention itself involves aggression. Joining the conversation entails elbowing one’s way to the dais, where there is a limited number of seats.

Thus, Bartholomae views writing through a lens of competition among writers and between readers and writers, suggesting that writers and readers are inevitably “others,” with different needs and concerns
from one another, and that writing, attempting to persuade an “other” of the validity of one’s views, is a necessarily combative act, even—especially—when the persuasive course that is taken claims mutual felicities for all parties. This notion of academic conversation as agonistic has become something of a commonplace, especially for feminists. For example, it constitutes the premise of Gesa Kirsch’s 1993 *Women Writing the Academy*, which attempts to discern how female academics from a range of disciplines insert themselves into professional discourse that is “based on notions of competition and winning” (19). Bartholomae subscribes to this commonplace, but still, his dictum needs some revision: writing is more accurately understood as *both* aggression and charity. With only a slight shift in perspective, what appears to be help (“charity”) might be understood as the violence of imposition and self-aggrandizement. As Kenneth Burke suggests, “altruism and egoism form a continuous series”; they are not the same thing, but they involve different aspects of regarding the self (211). The elusiveness of a purely beneficent act is examined in the context of writing centers by Jay Jacoby, who acknowledges that “doing good for others” is often complicated by the doer’s simultaneous self-interest. Tutors, Jacoby says, may want to help less capable students learn to help themselves, but they also find it hard to resist the urge to “play professor,” and are frequently “waiting for a fresh client upon whom to foist [their] knowledge” (138). Tweaking Bartholomae’s assertion, then, we can usefully think of writing as an act disguisable as either aggression or charity.

This contributes a valuable and overlooked parameter not only to our understanding of writing, but also to our discussions about writing, such as what takes place in tutoring conferences. Nancy Welch’s work highlights parallels between writing and writing conferences, both of which are often referred to as discussion, and both of which involve frequently unacknowledged aggression through their work to convert via persuasion. “Our articulated desires for a liberatory pedagogy,” Welch warns, “may, in fact, mask the underlying aggression that psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan places at the heart of teaching and learning” (36). By refusing to “remain silent” about the aggressive dimensions of writing and writing relationships, Welch makes an important contribution to writing center literature, which tends to emphasize the charitable, altruistic dimensions (36).

For Welch, the fundamental writing act is revision, and, as with Bartholomae’s generous view of invention, for Welch revision is a process that goes beyond text to involve the writer’s psyche: revision is what happens when an individual engages in re-casting her life by revising her own words. Most important, the revision of self/text entails aggression. Using Lacanian psychology, Welch discusses the dynamics of a writing center conference that involves a student she calls Lee and Welch herself,
who is a teacher, and therefore not a peer tutor. She acknowledges the aggression underlying her “seemingly benign” questions that attempt to push Lee toward the critical, questioning side of his conflicted persona and away from the obedient military side (49). Her attempts to further disrupt Lee’s already divided identity might be justified by Lacanian psychology, but are also motivated by her own sense of alienation toward his Marine ideology. Observing her own behavior after the fact erodes her self-image as a nurturing teacher because it “made visible the violence of teaching and learning as I felt the knife of Lee’s words against my throat, and it made visible my own authoritarianism as I sought to pull Lee into alignment with one self against another”(51). Welch’s thoughtful discussion shows “how writing teachers who base their work on collaborative and liberatory philosophies can rewrite their narratives to include, rather than suppress, the aggression and resistance that are fundamental to talking, writing, and revising our way into new—and according to Lacan, always disturbing—positions and understandings” (36-37). Welch attempts to lay bare the aggressiveness that lies beneath acts of altruism, and suggests we look at our own motivations for wanting to help, and often, change students.

Gorgias, the Tutor

I propose we use Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* to help us understand the rhetorical implications of aggression and persuasion in the writing center. Gorgias’s *Encomium* is not about peerness at all, nor is it even about writing per se. But it is about the way in which words change and even hurt people, and therefore it is about the responsibilities of those who wield words, such as tutors. Gorgias is concerned with speech situations, when speakers confront audiences in person. So that whereas Bartholomae touts invention and Welch revision, Gorgias’ critical composition stage is delivery, and the interaction that occurs at the moment of delivery. This is also critical in the rhetorical exchange of the writing center conference. Gorgias’ overall topic is rhetoric, or persuasion, specifically the way in which persuasive situations involve constraint and force. This is pertinent to writing center practice, both in terms of the constraints of real bodies meeting in the speech situation of the tutoring conference and regarding the potential forcefulness inherent in persuasive spoken or written texts that are the substance of tutoring conferences. Thus, Gorgias, a fifth-century B.C.E. sophist who lived and worked in Greece, can help us to synthesize Welch’s and Bartholomae’s discussions of aggression as they pertain to the writing center.

Gorgias sets out to absolve Helen of Troy of blame for being abducted by Paris. His search for motives yields the following results: If fate was responsible, then God is to blame; if force was used, then Paris,
as rapist, is guilty; if speech was the persuading entity, then Paris, the speaker, is responsible; if love was present, then sight is to blame, and we should pity rather than vilify Helen. This reasoning can be usefully tracked with terms from the Burkean pentad:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>AGENCY</th>
<th>AGENT</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helen’s visit to Troy</td>
<td>Fate</td>
<td>God</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Force</td>
<td>Paris as Rapist</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Paris as Rhetor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Helen’s eye/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helen as fallible human who sees</td>
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The last equation only appears to place Helen at fault for seeing Paris and falling in love, but quickly absolves her since, according to Górgias, sight is an empirical response that is not in the viewer’s control. Sight is not subjective at all, but rather, induces a reaction in response to a literal impression on the viewer’s mind. Thus, the “agent” is Helen’s fallible humanity. If this seems slippery, so be it, since Górgias says that all persuasive speech is founded on opinion, which is indeed slippery. The slipperiness of his and anyone’s persuasive attempts are exactly his point.

For writing center purposes, Górgias’ comments on the operations of speech are instructive. In his search for a motive, there is parity among the possible solutions. Each is a feasible explanation for why Helen goes to Troy. In his proem, Górgias refers not to abduction but simply to “Helen’s voyage to Troy” (40). He does not name what happened to Helen (“Who it was and why and how he sailed away, taking Helen as his love, I shall not say. To tell the knowing what they know shows it is right but brings no delight” (40).) because any vocabulary he uses would invariably suggest a particular motivation. Górgias knows well the Burkean dictum that “Speech is profoundly partisan” (177). Even at the end of the speech, Górgias still does not choose one particular explanation because his goal is to foreground the parity among various explanations—he wants all of the explanations functioning simultaneously, thereby underscoring their analogous operations. Speech can function like (or yield analogous persuasive effects) to love (as Plato’s
Obviously, the analogy most pertinent to a consideration of aggression is that speech can be like rape: "What cause then prevents the conclusion that Helen similarly, against her will, might have come under the influence of speech, just as if ravished by the force of the mighty?" (41). Under these circumstances, "The persuader, like a constrainer, does the wrong and the persuaded, like the constrained, in speech is wrongly charged" (41). Hence, influence of speech = ravishment and persuader = constrainer. Just in case his point paralleling persuasion and rape is not sufficiently clear, Górgias throws in another analogy: speech works on the soul in the same manner that drugs work on the body. Like words, drugs can bring health, but they can also kill. And, a rhetor/poisoner can administer toxic speech. That both analogies, rape and drugs, involve actual human bodies serves to point up the very real effect that speech can have on its users. For Górgias, sticks and stones may break one’s bones, but so can words.

The live meeting of bodies and words is also a prominent feature in the one-on-one, face-to-face conferences between tutors and students in writing centers. Most of us think of this as a benefit—rather than being a social security number in a lecture hall or a keyboardist in an online exchange, the student is a flesh-and-blood human being in the writing center. Górgias’ treatise on aggression is a necessary reminder of other, less sanguine aspects of the tutor-student encounter: The writing center tutor is also potentially a rhetor/rapist/poisoner. Admittedly, this is extreme, but then, our typical emphasis on the pleasures of peerness is but the flip side of such exaggeration. And it is only by allowing ourselves to entertain the possibilities at both extremes that we will come to fully understand the complexities of the tutoring dynamic. Let me also hasten to add that I, too, can be a rhetor/rapist/poisoner—as a teacher who speaks persuasively to students and colleagues, I am in a similarly compromised position.

I want to suggest that we view the writing center conference through the parity of equations Górgias sets up between speech, rape, and love (let us omit acts of God since they are wholly beyond our agency). If speech, rape, and love form a “continuous series,” to use Burke’s terms, then a hint of one is present in the expression of the other. Poisons are also cures; as Paracelsus remarked, anything is a poison in the right dosage. In other words, when we speak we may either seduce or rape; but always in the act of seduction the roots of rape are present. Although in practice these two things do not occur simultaneously, our practice will benefit from acknowledging the presence of both potentials, including their possible simultaneity. In other words, like writing, tutoring, too, can be an act of aggression disguised as an act of charity, or of rape disguised as love. It is not that it is impossible to be a peer, but rather that as a peer (and,
likewise, in any other human role) it is impossible for aggression to not be present at some level.

Górgias knows this. His attempt to liberate Helen from malicious detractors by explicating persuasion’s hold is itself a persuasive attempt. Górgias is self-conscious about this, as is apparent from his references to his own “reasoning” speech at least three times throughout this very short text. He refuses to forget (or let his hearers forget) that, like Paris, he, too, is making a speech, and that his speech is as potentially false and dangerous as Paris’. It is Górgias’ ironic sense of his own fragile position, his acknowledgment of his own dangerous potential, that is key. This is the stance I would like writing center tutors (and anyone who is going to engage in a persuasive exchange—in other words, anyone who speaks) to assume. In his conclusion Górgias summarizes his accomplishments: “I have by means of speech removed disgrace from a woman; I have observed the procedure which I set up at the beginning of the speech; I have tried to end the injustice of blame and the ignorance of opinion; I wished to write a speech which would be a praise of Helen and a diversion to myself” (42). This is a necessarily ironic statement in light of his own comments on the volatility of speech, and the impossibility of eradicating opinion. He has just asserted that because humans cannot know everything about the past or future, “All who have and do persuade people of things do so by molding a false argument” (41). Opinion constitutes the best (because it is all we have) but also the weakest (because it is so unstable) grounds for any argument. While Górgias claims to have removed disgrace from a woman through speech, he is fully aware, and so should be his listeners, that he may just as possibly have deceived his listeners by grounding his argument in false opinion. He may, in fact, have raped his listeners since this is what speech can do. His concluding line, “I wished to write a speech which would be a praise of Helen and a diversion to myself,” brings a shiver when one thinks of the rapist’s self-construction as mere “diversion.”

**Learning about Our Tutors’ Aggression**

Acknowledging aggressive “diversions” in the writing center will entail not only seeing the hidden aggression Welch helps to underscore, but also recognizing our own role in unproductively defusing or subverting aggression. Such reticence is observable in a recent online WCENTER listserv discussion about how a white tutor should have handled a white student who used “the N word” in a paper about language use (Mapel-Bloomberg). Although the use of *nigger* was a linguistic example not intended as racist, the tutor felt compelled to “steer the student into another discussion track” (Mapel-Bloomberg). Meanwhile, the conversation was overheard by another white tutor and her student,
who was of color. “Both tutors chose not to ‘discuss’ the comment with their respective students—but should they have?,” asks Kristin Mapel-Bloomberg, the director at this Writing Center. Yet, as I indicated in my own online response, the situation does not sound like the “outburst” Mapel-Bloomberg terms it at all; nigger seems to have been used not as a racist accusation, but in an analysis of racist language. If anyone was racist, it was the tutors, who through their silence reveal the unspoken but palpable tensions surrounding race in our society. These tensions are so strong that even in her report to colleagues, Mapel-Bloomberg refuses to say nigger. Refusing to engage a loaded term like this is characteristic of white discourse, which Toni Morrison shows is often about race even when it purports not to be. Through silence it invents “vocabulary designed to disguise the subject” (Morrison 50). This evasive feature of language is precisely the kind of persuasion to which a Gorgian perspective alerts us. Conversely, prolonging her tutors’ silence exhibits a passive aggression that is terribly unproductive for all parties. Conflict is an inherent aspect of the tutoring relationship, and a head-on confrontation with the issue of charged, derogatory language and its appropriate use would have served both tutors and tutees in this setting.

While in the above scenario derogatory language was sidestepped, tutors often openly complain about abusive tutees, but they more seldomly reveal their own aggression. One of my students wrote to another after a frustrating session, “Do we as tutors have a policy about discussing students of unsuccessful sessions? Like, is there an antidefamation clause preventing us from saying things like, ‘Watch out for this guy. He’s dumb as dirt.’?” Paolo goes on to make an interesting distinction: saying this would be wrong, but thinking it is inevitable. After venting on the specifics of a session, he concludes: “Should we or shouldn’t we talk about our sessions? How should we talk about our sessions? How do we evaluate our sessions to properly find where the problems lie?”

Paolo wrote these insightful questions to Susanne as part of an assigned Dialogue Journal in which students are asked to write to one another in a free-form, casual manner about their experiences tutoring, their concerns, and their responses to the readings and class discussions of their tutor training seminar. With these questions, which are written in week 4 of tutoring, Paolo is attempting to negotiate how to address this deceptively difficult, even “aggressive” assignment, which requires writing in an informal voice to a peer audience while being aware of but not directly addressing another, more formal, non-peer, evaluating audience: the instructor. For some students, the assignment can be very much like writing to a Martian. But precisely because of the way it entails a complicated construction of audience, the Dialogue Journal can also provide a forum for talking about and getting feedback on those aspects
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of tutor training that seem to be unmentionable—aspects which frequently involve aggression. Students can write to their peers what would be unacceptable to tell an instructor; instructors can respond without punishing infringements. The Dialogue Journal provides a form and an appropriate audience for venting, for breaking the “antidefamation clause” and acknowledging to one’s peers the aggressions one has committed, and for reflecting and theorizing on past and future actions.

Two weeks after his queries about the boundaries of their discussion, Paolo wrote to Susanne about another session, this time with a student who refused to participate:

She flat out told me to read the paper. It was getting ugly and I could tell the questions weren’t going [sic]. I tried commands: “Tell me what you wrote here and how it connects with the idea in the next paragraph.” Nope, nothing happened with that. I started getting goofy and said that one paragraph sounded the same as another paragraph later on in the paper. I asked if I was right in my observation, and she half-assedly assented. So I upped the ante. I told her if these paragraphs said the same thing that she would have to throw one of them out. She said sure. Then I said if she threw out a paragraph she would have to redo the conclusion (this was supposed to be a hint that she was actually saying something different in those two paragraphs). She said sure. Then I said that the paragraph in the middle of the two in question would have to change so that she would have a better transition between ideas. She said sure. I should have ended the session right there because I could have told her to wipe my—well, maybe not that, but I could have suggested any number of ludicrous things for her to do. Do I feel guilty? I don’t know. She wasn’t accepting my real advice so what difference would it have made? Actually, my ludicrous advice was based on her ludicrous answers to my questions. What else could I do?

I read these comments a few weeks after the event had transpired, and was immediately disturbed. Paolo’s behavior seemed unconscionable; in a Gorgian reading, what he called “goofiness” might be termed “rape.” The tutee had been intentionally goaded with untenable advice. If she left the Center and implemented these changes, then the poison he administered would have successfully taken root. Her easy acquiescence may have been due to laziness or boredom, but it also might very well have been a response to the power dynamics of the tutoring situation. “The persuader, like a constrainer, does the wrong and the persuaded, like the constrained, is wrongly charged.” While my knee-jerk response was to censure his behavior—to constrain the constrainer—the form of the
Dialogue Journal belied such a response. Students were supposed to be talking honestly to one another about what really happened in their sessions. Paolo was doing exactly that. Moreover, he was examining the ethics of his own persuasive attempts in a manner as self-conscious as Gorgias’, fully aware that I was his audience as well as Susanne and that my own response was circumscribed by the implied contract of the Dialogue Journal. To lash out at Paolo for adhering to the assignment would be to overstep my own bounds of aggression. Besides, a few sentences later, he effectively preempted a retributive response, telling Susanne (and me): “You got to forgive me for this entry. It’s sort of a shotgun blast of emotion.”

By couching his entry as a confession which called forth an absolving forgiveness, Paolo had essentially admitted his own guilt and preempted the need to dwell on it, instead opening the door to a more productive discussion about the implications of his aggressive interaction. I could express my troubled reaction without having to grade him for it. In fact, were I going to grade him for the assignment he was engaged in (an honest and reflective account of tutoring concerns as they arise), I would have to (and did) give him an A. Meanwhile, we could talk about the way in which his tutoring assumptions seemed to demand a certain breed of bright, energetic students, a subgroup he certainly could not count on as a tutor or as a prospective high school teacher. Alongside my comments, Susanne responded with clearheaded forthrightness:

Not to be harsh but you’re right; I don’t get it. Are you saying you couldn’t work with this girl because she was not responding; or because she was not responding well. . . . Sometimes, some days some students just aren’t for you. . . . You just don’t click; otherwise interested, bright tutees are someplace else in their mind. Sometimes it just doesn’t happen. So at least we have one another to vent to.

Later in the semester, Susanne recounted her own explosive encounter with a student who told her, “Fuck all that; I came here for help not suggestions. This paper is due tomorrow and that is the last chance to turn in revisions.” Susanne tells him the paper must have been assigned with more time than his last minute preparations indicate and that her time is just as valuable as his and his poor planning should not be taken out on her. Then she asks Paolo, “What is your breaking point? When do you finally have to stop and say enough is enough already? When do you use your power/authority as a tutor arbitrarily? Did I go too far?”

Instead of responding directly to her plaintive questions, Paolo develops his own theory of aggressive tutoring. He explains that he has observed another tutor’s session that week, which had taken a dramatic
turnabout after fifteen minutes of brainstorming, when the tutee who had seemed acquiescent suddenly announced that she had already resolved the things they were discussing and that she really just needed help on her introduction. Paolo felt that the tutee had given little indication that Jane’s agenda was not working. Although after they switched gears things seemed to work out, Paolo was still troubled by the initial lack of communication:

Jane and Jane’s tutee were both too nice, too polite. These are good things in social situations [in which there are] undesired meetings with people one doesn’t really want to know . . ., but greater hostility is needed in a tutoring session. Hostility in the sense that there is some aggressive questioning going on which digs for a deep and stable foundation. Jane’s session was almost a house of cards, disappearing on top of the other. But when it did fall both tutor and tutee acknowledged it was high and quickly changed gears and attacked the real issue: developing an introduction.

As Paolo articulates his theory of aggressive questioning, his own behavior earlier in the semester begins to take on new meaning. His goading of the girl who too readily accepted his bogus advice now emerges as a pedagogical approach, at once aggressive and caring. As his tutoring evolves, he has acquired an aggressive tutoring stance, one which assumes a theory of learning that echoes Irene Lurkis Clark when she speculates, “Isn’t it possible that sometimes students might have to be uncomfortable in order to learn?” (83). Paolo recognizes that the teaching-learning relationship is, as Welch remarks, “dialogic, relational, and interfering and disruptive” (40).

This does not at all excuse the way in which Paolo baited his student; one thing he (and we all) will have to learn is to distinguish between positive and negative aggression, tough love and rape—as well as to acknowledge that sometimes it is next to impossible to make this distinction. But having a space in which to talk about his own aggression enabled Paolo to develop his own theories that legitimately encompass combative behavior as a learning tool. Later in the semester he pursued this line of thinking in a paper, entitled “Attacking with an Agenda,” in which he suggests the tutor prepare for battle, establish the battleground, and clarify the conventions of warfare. He describes an “unsuccessful session” that he feels goes wrong from the start when the tutee, disputing her teacher’s comments, feels a transition is needed between two sentences. Because Paolo is not yet acquainted with the paper, he has no solution, but rather than trying to gain more background information he masks his inability to respond by issuing an order: “Read those
sentences. . . .” Upon reflection, he realizes the way in which a battle mentality operated here: “I used my command to the tutee as a shield to give me time to collect myself in the hopes of having something to say once she had finished reading the sentence.” As the session progresses, he “let her become a loose cannon and I, in my confusion, became her target rather than the paper. . . .”

The battle metaphor, palpable throughout his paper, underscores Paolo’s central observation about the presence of aggression in the tutor-tutee dynamic. In his conclusion, however, he backpedals. He acknowledges that the metaphor might make some of us uncomfortable, and tries to defuse such resistance by insisting that tutor and tutee are not really opposed to one another in battle, but rather are united in addressing “the real enemy,” the student’s ignorance or shortcomings. But this sidesteps the force of his central observation. Paolo dodges the issue he has so boldly raised, most likely in deference to my response to his earlier drafts regarding my discomfort with the battle metaphor. Despite my avowed skepticism toward peerness and my insistence on acknowledging the presence of tension in the tutoring relationship, I nevertheless succumbed to discomfort when confronted with overt displays of aggression. Such dissipation of the inevitable aggression in the “peer” tutoring dynamic occurs frequently in writing centers and is something we need to work consciously to avoid. Although my intervention in Paolo’s writing process resulted in deflecting an otherwise keen awareness of aggression, on the whole, throughout the semester Paolo fearlessly and productively enacted what he wrote to Susanne in week 6: “More mistakes should be made in teaching and learning.”

The Ethics of Aggression

In Paolo’s issuing of battle commands and in the economy Górgias establishes for rhetoric, the rhetor appears to have considerably more power than the listener. “The persuader, like a constrainer, does the wrong and the persuaded, like the constrained, in speech is wrongly charged.” But we must not read Gorgias as absolving his audience of responsibility. His speech about the power of speech is a powerful warning to an audience about the importance of listening with critical awareness. This is precisely the skill tutoring entails, and activities like the Dialogue Journal foster such complex listening acts not simply through reflection on one’s own failed listening in a session, but also by engaging in writing to a complicated set of listeners/readers who are both peer and instructor, aggressor and friend. Gorgias and Paolo both realize the risks and responsibilities inherent when one speaks and listens. Indeed, in tutoring, the line between speaking and listening is often blurred. Welch warns, “even my smiles and nods were subtle exercises of
power as I attempted to draw [Lee] toward some meanings, away from others . . .” (51). In “peer” tutoring sessions, as in any real dialogue, tutors are both rhetor and audience, and they need to be cognizant of their power and susceptibilities in each role. Like Górgias, we must be self-conscious about our own persuasive attempts. As tutors and tutor trainers we can use Dialogue Journals and Górgias, alongside Bartholomae and Welch, to confront the presence of concealed aggression in the tutoring session. The resulting conversations will provide us with a repertoire of texts that address the crucial ethical responsibilities when a tutor speaks and listens.

Notes

1 For a refreshingly alternative view on the benefits of online exchange, however, see Eva Bednarowicz, whose research explores the possibility that because of the invisibility of the body, online exchange actually provides more freedom for self-creation, inventiveness, and therefore greater opportunity for writerly growth.

2 By this I do not mean that victims of rape are seduced; rather, the continuum helps explain the motivational economy in which the rapist functions.

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