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Pedagogies of Belonging: Listening to Students and Peers

by Julie A. Bokser

After they are admitted, many students find actually joining the university to be disorienting and even daunting, especially those whose socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and/or educational worlds differ markedly from the academic world they encounter in college. We know that writing centers play a key role in helping students make this transition, serving as crucial conduits of adjustment for otherwise marginalized students. But exactly how we help tutors to help these students is less familiar ground. Tutors are not usually considered when composition scholars characterize the ways in which writing professionals help students belong. Nevertheless, tutors as well as teachers are party to a process seen variously as assimilation, accommodation, separatism, acculturation, translation, or repositioning (Severino; Bruffee; Lu, "Writing as Repositioning"), and the students tutors work with must undergo a process that can be positively characterized as "going native" (Bizzell, "Cognition" 386), quizically understood as invention (Bartholomae), or negatively viewed as conversion (J. Harris 103; Lu, "Conflict") or initiation (T. Fox). Clearly, there is no consensus among these many "camps"; rather, what we have is provocative, useful discussion on the pedagogical processes of belonging. But many a tutor who finds herself on the frontlines with a lost student will not have the benefit of knowing this discussion. As a writing center administrator who has worked in two urban institutions with ethnically and linguistically diverse student populations, I have struggled to formulate tutor training that urges tutors to consider the complexities of belonging. I believe the tutor needs to understand the paradoxical ways in which writing and academic literacy more generally are instruments of belonging that can constrain as well as liberate. To write one’s

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way into the disciplinary discourse of a political science major, for example, may simultaneously bring the freedom of new ways of thinking and new potential careers, while curtailing more immediate intimacy with a home culture. Let me clarify my position: The tutor will know the paradox, but tutor training can give her the conceptual framework to successfully navigate it.

Writing about the ways in which universities constrain as much as liberate through their teaching of sanctioned forms of literacy, Nancy Grimm argues that writing centers should intervene in this literacy paradox, mediating between the institution and students. She wants us to train tutors to question "the rules of the academic literacy club" instead of to unquestioningly help tutees conform to them (117). While I am certain that not all writing center tutors are as ideologically conventional as Grimm implies, her argument nonetheless hits home. In her chapter entitled, "Redesigning Academic Identity Kits," Grimm considers Anne DiPardo's article about a tutor named Morgan who is unsuccessful in her efforts to help her tutee conform to expected academic conventions. Grimm questions Morgan's goals and asks, "But what if Morgan had been prepared differently? What if her tutor training and her preprofessional education had insisted on conceptual and theoretical understanding over strategic know-how?" (66). Elizabeth Boquet shares Grimm's impatience with what they both imply is a typical model of tutor training—one that focuses on content knowledge and scripted how-to approaches to a finite list of common writing problems. Boquet critiques what she calls this "low risk/low yield model" of tutor training, encouraging instead a more chaotic, "noisy" approach in which a writing center director asks herself, "how might I encourage this tutor to operate on the edge of his or her expertise?" (78, 81). Both Boquet and Grimm imply that if tutors lack imagination, it is because their training has lacked imagination. Indeed, although I am doubtful that there is any such thing as "typical" tutor training, the key question that I believe is raised by these two insightful writing center scholars is how can we better train tutors to tutor imaginatively and effectively?

In the pages that follow, I sketch as well as ruminate on my approach to this problem. Through accounts of my own experience teaching a credit-bearing tutor training class at two institutions, I trace my attempts to illuminate ideas about belonging through a rhetoric of listening. Always, I consider the challenges of a pedagogy of belonging. I use this phrase as shorthand to describe as well as to complicate our understanding of how students can belong in a classroom or tutoring site, and how we teach individuals to become members of the academic community. I offer my
experiences not as a model, but to generate an extended consideration of what is involved in making such encounters beneficial moments of cultural exchange.

In the present demographic environment of the United States, this issue is especially pertinent. For example, recent census figures indicate that those who identify as Hispanics are already the nation’s largest minority and that this population will continue to increase for many years. The census also shows this group to have a large proportion of people below the age of 18, to experience a lower rate of educational attainment than non-Hispanic Whites, and to face more language barriers. Thus, statistics on Hispanics alone signal that writing center work with students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) will most likely increase, and that many of these encounters will be with people who have already been in the United States for a while or who plan on staying. In other words, more and more, tutoring will be a “contact-zone” encounter in which participants will need to work even harder to figure out how to collaborate with someone who speaks a different language, holds different cultural values, and lives down the block. Mary Louise Pratt tells us to embrace the pedagogic potential of cultural clashing in the contact zone, trying to learn from instead of avoid moments when subordinate individuals and groups come into contact with those in dominant, hegemonic roles (“Arts” 34). The contact zone demands that teachers and tutors—in “dominant” roles by definition—acquire new, imaginative, and effective pedagogic approaches to issues of belonging, including a consideration of what belonging means in a multicultural setting and whether belonging is always possible or even desirable.

To help tutors help linguistically marginalized students, I structure tutor training so that issues of belonging pertinent to higher education (such as assimilation or initiation) are central. Carol Severino, David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, and Kenneth Bruffee are compositionists whose work can help tutors balance the desire to help tutees conform with an understanding of the price of conforming for some students. For example, asking tutors to read Bizzell’s “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty. What We Need to Know About Writing” raises issues that are central to a pedagogy of belonging. Bizzell talks about student writers who encounter “the problems of a traveler in an unfamiliar country—yet a country in which it is possible to learn the language and the manners and even ‘go native’ while still remembering the land from which one has come” (386). Bizzell’s metaphor makes for interesting analysis. To “go native” is to let loose and act as if one belongs. Presumably, Bizzell intends “going native” to reverse the usual association of native with less-educated, subjugated people who have been forcefully converted. Instead, she assigns it to the academic world—a world to
which, ironically, no one is "native." Although Bizzell doesn't acknowledge it, to tell a student of color who successfully assumes a bicultural world view that she has "gone native" demands the student recognize doubly ironic overtones: first, she must see the irony of an allusion to native-like comfort in a world where there are no first-language speakers; and second and more disturbingly, she must recognize that to presume native-like comfort in a land where she is not native might make her feel like the last thing she expected to be, a colonizer.

At my current institution, students are generally not open to radical critique of existing institutional power structures. Therefore, instead of using a theorist like Nancy Grimm with tutors, I find it more effective to introduce someone like Bruffee, whose pedagogy of belonging contains ideas of conversation and collaboration that tutors tend to like, but which they can also be coaxed to critique. Interestingly, Bruffee uses the term "translator" to refer to the teacher who helps students to become acculturated to new knowledge communities by teaching them the language and conventions of these new communities. But although he talks of translation, he is not referring to or terribly sensitive to ESL students. True, he wants joining disciplinary or professional communities to be "unthreatening and fail-safe," but as Pratt points out, safety is not a feature of the contact zone (74). Bruffee's teacher is supposed to ask herself how "the community languages [her] students already know reinforce or interfere with learning the language [she is] teaching" (73). The teacher should help students "divorce" from other communities (79). Not only does Bruffee fail to consider the ramifications of "divorce," but he also never doubts students' desire to join, nor does he question the value of the professional communities with which he wants students to affiliate. Any discussion of Bruffee must highlight what he himself overlooks: the problems of membership that teaching facilitates. It must therefore ask students to be competent critics of a group's systems of discourse. To some extent, a pedagogy of belonging means that nobody should be too comfortable with their own belonging—my goal is to encourage tutors to learn how to question their own commitments, to understand others' commitments, and to acknowledge the challenges and conflicts present in any individual's multiple commitments.

To help students examine commitments, I have begun to make listening a primary object of attention in tutor training. Listening is obviously a component of tutoring; but, as Muriel Harris says in her discussion of the topic, it is inadequately attended to in our literature (57). And, while composition theory can introduce the conceptual aspects of belonging, too many tutors actively resist anything that can be construed as theory. This theory only becomes meaningful when tutors learn how to listen for
issues of belonging from tutees themselves. Along with my tutors, I have been developing "a rhetoric of listening" as a way of noticing commitments. While listening is central to tutoring, I don’t believe it’s possible to teach someone to listen. But I do think it’s possible that, by foregrounding listening, students will become aware of how they listen, what kinds of things others hear, and what kinds of things we all tend to tune out. In other words, a rhetoric of listening attempts to develop a method for listening to what others say, but also a method for listening to how we listen. Perhaps because listening appears to be something that is automatic and straightforward, it is an easy topic to introduce. Then, as tutors seriously engage with their own acts of listening, figuring out just what kinds of listening are at work in their tutoring, they move from resisting theory to theorizing for themselves. This move is not always smooth—that is, theorizing is hard work—but it tends to be self-motivated. Tutors theorize about listening because they really want to figure out how to do their jobs.

Not recognizing the challenges and conflicts of a student’s commitments is precisely what DiPardo accuses Morgan of when she calls her “insufficiently curious” in the above scenario cited by Grimm (DiPardo 36). Morgan, an African-American tutor, never finds out that Fanny, a Navajo, has learned English as a second language. DiPardo asserts that what Morgan needed most was to listen more (365). Yet, when listening is not a focus of study, this advice can seem empty because listening itself appears to be transparent. One of my tutors made this disturbingly clear in a posting on our course Blackboard several years ago:

I have not yet been in a situation wherein listening more to the student would have been at all beneficial to the session. Usually, the student doesn’t know what is [wrong] exactly with the paper, let alone how to fix it, in which case, they generally have little to nothing to which I would "listen more"...Other than letting the tutor know the crucial information regarding their fundamental inability to write yet, does the student have anything else that the tutor could listen more to?

In contrast, when tutor training highlights the rhetoric of listening, students quickly learn what else they might listen for and appreciate how complicated this can be. In a recent class in which listening had curricular precedence, a tutor was concerned about how student commitments influence the possibility for collaboration. In a posting on the same kind of electronic forum, Heidi referred to Alice Gillam’s article, “Collaborative Learning Theory and Peer Tutoring Practice”:
Gillam brings up the point that Suzanne and Kari probably have formed their relationship on their common upbringing, gender, and ethnicity, as well as their similar learning goals. It is not their shared studenthood that bonds them, but their basic human similarities. Not all tutor-tutee partnerships will be so homogenous (luckily, I think)—what impact does this have on collaboration? Are some sessions less likely to productively create learning together due to their first impressions of each other? Is the “peer relationship” of students enough to forge productive collaboration, or are we doomed to only relate successfully to those people that are a reflection of ourselves?

Instead of doubting the point of listening, Heidi reflects on its subtleties. In essence, she asks, who can listen to one another? What are the conditions for productive listening? Can we only listen to those with similar membership pedigrees? Krista Ratcliffe attempts to answer these questions by conceptualizing rhetorical listening as a strategy of invention. One of the few theorists who attends to the role of listening in rhetorical theory, Ratcliffe points out how we can hear differently, how we can notice voices drowned out by the din of dominant paradigms, and even how listening is a useful trope for how we can more fully engage ourselves professionally.2 As a strategy of invention, listening allows us “to receive, not master” other discourses, and to “argue for what we deem fair and just while simultaneously questioning that which we deem fair and just” (209, 203). Tutors, who are, after all, professional listeners, need to be introduced to new, complicated understandings of listening that will help them to navigate the conflictual discourses they face when working with displaced students. Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening is certainly not a cure-all, for as she says, it is ongoing and discomforting, but coming to understand listening as a process that will help “us continually negotiate our always evolving standpoints, our identities, with the always evolving standpoints of others” can give tutors “conceptual and theoretical understanding” of their own “strategic know-how” (Ratcliffe 209; Grimm 66). In the next section, I narrate an early stage in my work with the rhetorics of listening, exploring how listening to tutors and co-teachers both illuminates and complicates ideas about what belonging might mean for ESL students and their tutors.

“I want you to write a certain way”

In spring 1999, as part of a co-taught tutor-training course, Magda (a fellow graduate student from Poland) and I assigned a group project that we knew would challenge speaking skills, but (as will soon become clear) it inadvertently also challenged...
listening skills. As part of my commitment as Assistant Director of the Writing Center at a large Midwestern public university, I had taught the course three times already; Magda was new to the writing center world. The center had an unusual set-up in that tutors and the two co-teachers were all learning to “become” teachers. Magda and I were Ph.D. graduate students in rhetoric and composition teaching secondary education graduate and undergraduate students to tutor. This arrangement, in which pedagogical aspirations, membership, and authority were so much a text and subtext for all members of the class, provided an interesting ground for an exploration of pedagogies of belonging because, although relations between teachers and students were as “asymmetrical” as they must always be, neither party yet considered itself in a fully “dominant, hegemonic” role. In this setting, the complications of peerness and the act of listening to peers—mainstays of tutoring philosophy—were central components of our pedagogical dialogues at several levels. Over time, what I am calling a rhetoric of listening evolved from my experiences with this course.

The project required students, who had been tutoring since the second week of the term, to make a presentation to brand new tutors at the next term’s Writing Center orientation. All eight students decided to work together to introduce future tutors to the issues inherent in tutoring students who speak English as a second language. They chose this topic because they felt their own orientation had not adequately addressed it; their hopes were to bolster their own tutoring skills with ESL students and to better prepare the next crew. By choosing to work with ESL issues, students confronted the political complexities of balancing the call for academic assimilation with the concurrent need for incorporating new cultures and standards into our changing academic practices. In other words, students were pulled from opposite ends by two reasonable yet seemingly opposed exigencies: assimilation, on the one hand, and the forging of what Patricia Bizzell calls “hybrid” discourse culture, on the other (“Hybrid”). While helping ESL students to write promised liberation via academic and economic advancement, it simultaneously posed constraint by imposing uncomfortable standards and even threatening loss of a home culture. Like many of us, students confronted their own conflicted roles as purveyors of pedagogies of belonging they didn’t wholeheartedly support.

At this institution, the issue of assimilation is particularly pertinent because, while there are many foreign students, most of the Writing Center’s ESL clients are resident immigrants and, frequently, citizens. These students live in the United States permanently with their families, and most have a good understanding of American culture. Many of these individuals have lived here for years; often, they speak their native
language, but their memory of the native country is not strong. Few have been taught to write in their native tongues. Most learned to write in public schools here, at the same time they were learning to speak English, and they typically have mastered the latter fairly well while their writing skills vary considerably. In other words, notwithstanding their lack of proficiency in written English, many of these students are Americans first and foremost. Additionally, among those students whose first and only language is English, a great many are first-generation college students who have limited acquaintance with university culture or expectations. These conditions help to explain why Writing Center tutors feel pressure to serve as cultural guides, translating world views for students who desperately desire to “invent the university” (Bartholomae). This complexity also shows how institutional exigencies determine the specific “conceptual” needs of tutors in training.

Students in our tutor-training course were asked to act as peers, but the group project required them to become teachers. Peer and teacher are conflicting roles, but role conflict probably occurred before the onset of the group project, since as John Trimbur argues, peer tutor combines words that imply equality and mastery, respectively, and is therefore an institutionally induced contradiction (“Peer Tutoring”). Thus, a sensitivity to belonging reveals varying power differentials between three groups of supposedly equal “students”: there were class members (soon-to-be experienced tutors), the students they would be teaching (novice tutors), and the students they were teaching about as well as tutoring (ESL writers). In sum, cultural differences, competing institutional status, and interpersonal dynamics gave rise to the complexity and confusion typical of contact-zone encounters.

In a class activity designed to stimulate thinking for the ESL project, we read a paper with a strong accent, one that marked the student as a writer of nonstandard English. The subject of the paper was also, as it were, accents. I should say that I (not Magda) brought in the paper, which was written several years earlier by a student, Lynn, in one of my composition courses.5 The assignment was to write about an experience of negotiating two languages, using essays by Richard Rodriguez and Barbara Mellix as both starting point and stylistic template. Here is the second paragraph of Lynn’s revised draft:

The reading of Rodriguez’s experience caused me to recall my own experiences between three distinctive dialects. English, Cantonese, and Chinese are the dialects identify me. I was born in Canton, China twenty years ago. I constantly experience different languages, when
immigrating to the United States. There is no doubt that I would have
difficulties with the private, family language and public, school language.

A sophisticated sense of irony both bittersweet and humorous pervades this writer's
prose as she goes on to discuss the fact that she acquired a new Chinese dialect more
proficiently than English in a public school in Chicago's Chinatown. She reveals her
family's frustration when she failed to translate business letters for them while she was
in grade school. One of the few language successes she records involves removing her
accent, which she unexpectedly accomplished by sitting next to a Latina student:

As time pasted, I did learn a lot of English words. There was a period
where I only could think of is English vocabulary. That is when I was in
seventh grade, a Spanish girl sits next to me. My permanent seat for the
whole year. This young lady really helped me in my English. She helped
me to get rid of my Chinese accent. Listening to her Spanish accent
allows me to correct my Chinese accent.

Our discussion of this paper evolved into a debate about whether and for whom
accents are desirable. With the help of terminology from the week's assigned article by
Carol Severino, the group labored in particular over the degree to which they perceived
their job as tutors to be a task of assimilation—erasing accents—by helping newcomers
to join an academic, standard-English prose world. Was assimilation implied in the
very job description? Severino provided terms for different political stances toward
teaching ESL students, which our students summarized as follows: assimilationist—a
teacher (or tutor) who advocates standard English and the loss of home culture;
accommodationist—one who advocates joining mainstream discourse but also values
biculturalism; and, separatist—one who wants ESL students to keep their native,
accented voice.

Ensuing discussion was rich. Tutors questioned the degree to which they were forced
to be assimilationists, considered whether their tutoring practice was in accord with
their philosophy, and identified situations where they could encourage separatist writ-
ing. Barbara, the only African American, turned Severino's use of the terms from a
stance the teacher or tutor assumes to levels a student moves through at each stage in
her education. She then insisted:

But your ultimate goal...you're always, you know, advancing, and look-
ing for...the next level would ultimately be an assimilationist—and not
so much to forget the whole culture, but to ultimately be well under-
stood, well read, and able to express yourself well under the right
academic... so I don’t think they’re that different from each other. I just think you reach them at different levels... I probably want to be an accommodationist, but as much as I’m fighting it I probably am moving more toward the assimilationist. Just from the mere fact that I want to be an English teacher, you know. I want you to write a certain way, no matter how I color that up, you know. I want you to write a certain way.6

Anne responded hesitantly, looking at our outline of the categories on the blackboard and slowly admitting that she might be an assimilationist against her better judgment: “I mean what you think is best might not be in agreement with what you practice. I mean—you know, I hate—I don’t really want to be an assimilationist, but—”

Barbara: But you are, Anne!
A: What?
B: We are! We all are.
A: Yeah, that’s not what you want to be, but it’s what you’re practicing.

A bit later, Megan tentatively revisited this issue, wondering if the group’s stress on the rich content of ESL papers meant they were separatists. Anne replied by reminding us to consider students’ viewpoints. Her comment revealed her awareness that students’ desires are shaped by the political forces of those with more power, teachers:

I think we have to think of what they want us to do, because I have not gotten any student who came in and said, “Can you help me with this paper so that I sound more Chinese?” I mean, you know what I’m saying, it’s like, “I want this to sound, quote unquote, American.” So I’m thinking that they sort of want us to be assimilationists. And also maybe that’s not by their choice, that’s by, well I think it probably is by their choice, but it’s also by their professor’s choice.

Lilia, who was planning to study ESL at the master’s level the following year, admitted she was still uncertain about her stance: “Because I’m somewhere in between accommodationist and separatist I guess, but—.”

“But again.” Megan interrupted, attempting to get the group to arrive at a consensus, “I think everyone wants to be as tutors the assimilationist.”

Gia, the only Asian American, protested:

No, I don’t know that that’s where I want to be. I don’t look up to that as something to reach for. I think we should reach to be able to be separatists, I mean that’s kind of... But I know that’s not reasonable, I
know that's not gonna happen at least now. So that's why I kind of reach for the accommodationist's view, where I see that assimilation is necessary right now...

In essence, these tutors were debating where they belonged in a conversion process. Reading an ESL student's paper, they discovered, meant listening simultaneously to the student's conflicted desires, society's dictates, and their own self-concept of their job description. They were beginning to sense that to teach literacy encompasses hearing the troubling, often contradictory nuances of belonging. They saw themselves as compelled to uphold a practice that the "converts" themselves desire because it is the only clear route to success. Moreover, tutors were uncomfortable with enforcing a single standard for written communication, yet they nevertheless acknowledged their own desire for tutees to "write a certain way." They saw themselves, that is, as instruments and agents of a system that they didn't entirely condone but didn't know how to escape. "What values are involved in the decision by writing center personnel to help others assimilate, that really is the question," Christina Murphy has recently written (?). Our students confronted this question with thoughtfulness and complexity.

In other words, like John Trimbur's "rhetoric of dissensus," the rhetoric of listening entails confronting the "forces which determine who may speak and what may be said" (Trimbur, "Consensus" 451). Trimbur asserts that these forces present themselves as universally agreed-upon consensus, and the rhetoric of dissensus unmasks and interrogates this supposed consensus. The rhetoric of listening also involves resisting attempts to impose consensus within the more local group dynamic. Although speakers like Barbara and Megan tried to impose their views on everyone ("You are an assimilationist. We all are!"), dissent was allowed to remain. In other words, foregrounding the rhetoric of listening in the classroom and in tutoring sessions should impart an ability to hear the fact that everyone is not in agreement. Such rhetoric, along with "relentless self-reflection," is necessary for productive exchange in the writing center (Grimm 117).

**Hearing Accents as Charming**

Another form of dissensus was present in the classroom, one that I only became fully aware of when I listened to a tape of the proceedings several months afterwards. Without planning or even knowing of our differences, Magda and I were offering two opposing messages about Lynn's paper. I felt that, though the paper was written in nonstandard English, its use of irony and detail made it in many respects linguistically proficient. Lynn had worked within the parameters of the assignment to great effect;
her essay written with nonstandard usage was eloquent and moving. Magda, on the other hand, felt it reflected a real struggle that should be respected as the writer's desire to put the struggle behind her, which could only be achieved by erasing her written accent, her errors.

At one point during the discussion of Severino’s article, I called attention to *Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldúa, which we had considered using as a course reading before we settled on Severino. Rather, I now realize I had considered Anzaldúa, and Magda had replaced that idea with Severino. I described Anzaldúa’s style of moving back and forth between English, Spanish, and Tex Mex. I said,

> It’s about language, and her point—she’s really advocating for embracing this language which is her, which is a mixture, which goes back and forth...and this is OK and it’s sophisticated linguistically. [She is saying,] “This is who I am, and this is who other people should be.” But, assimilationists still probably would reject what Gloria Anzaldúa is advocating.

Magda immediately interjected:

> Yeah, I would. I would reject it. I mean I love it. But in terms of teaching, if you got it from a student, it’s not—I mean she’s basically got both languages down pat so she can play around with it. It’s a good thing you said that you didn’t give this an A because I would think, well, what did the student think when you presumably gushed about it and said this is a good paper?

Magda, a fluent and accented speaker of English as a second language herself, then said that she never wanted to hear, in fact, didn’t believe that she had an accent. It soon became clear to all of us that it was easy to long for an accent when you felt you didn’t have one. Those of us who had grown up speaking more or less the same as those around us saw accents as desirable marks of exoticism. But by “exoticizing” ESL students, we were obstructing real listening (Zamel 516). Megan, a native English speaker, said passionately that she wished Lynn and other bilingual students didn’t want to get rid of their accents. “That’s part of the charm, you know,” she said. “They shouldn’t want to get rid of their accents.” Magda balked:

> It’s different when you’re crossing borders and there’s a reason why you’re leaving a particular lifestyle. So it comes with a whole host of luggage. You’re leaving this lifestyle, so the language is probably the last thing to go, your accent. But you really want...I mean they can’t see
where you came from but they can tell, right? And I can't begin to tell you. I mean people and friends ask me what's life in Poland like. Well, I'm not in Poland and there's a reason for that, OK?....

"Is that an issue a lot of immigrants have?" Sarah asked, suddenly aware that her childhood longing for a Scottish or Irish accent was the result of linguistic and cultural insularity.

Magda answered by pointing to the significance of a second-language speaker's motivations for being in a new country—to the difference between voluntary immigrants and refugees. "We're not all me, who just decided to drop and go," she said. Then she returned to Lynn's paper. I now see the following exchange as a conciliatory gesture regarding my pedagogical insertion of what had become a contentious student essay. In the actual exchange, our words almost overlap. When Magda refers to the "charming" comment as offensive, the overt "you" is Megan. Yet surely, I am her main addressee:

Magda: So I guess you know when I'm reading this and I know it sounds charming to you but to me it's like this person is really trying...

Julie: It's really a struggle.

Magda: It's really a struggle, so I'm on the side of this person who's really wanting you not to say maybe it's charming because you've got an accent....But it is a good piece and it really shows the struggle. And, hey, three languages.

My overly anxious desire to align myself with Magda's reading of struggle and Magda's ready repetition of my words ("It's really a struggle") as well as her pause in between critiquing the "charming" and endorsing the supposed value of Lynn's piece indicate quick attempts to stage an agreement that wasn't really present. Although Magda's reaction was quite forceful, because we didn't convert such outbursts into text for class discussion, I don't really know for sure whether Megan ever recognized just how offensive her use of "charm" was. I saw my own offenses, but I had the benefit of listening to the tape of our classroom and hearing my own gaffes made more apparent. There I confronted how much I had dominated discussions and realized how willing Magda had been to learn from a peer who had taught the course before. Our own interactions crossed contact zones on several fronts and taught both of us much about how to work alongside a person whose world view is other than one's own. But we did not learn how to identify and confront our differences in front of students. Eventually, this chasm led me to conceptualize a rhetoric of listening.
Listening for How We Belong

Originally, I did not hear the interchange between Magda and myself as conflict. Afterwards, when the tutors' final ESL presentation was reductive, didn't really confront cultural difference, and presented a consensus we knew didn't exist, Magda and I wondered if it was because we had failed to model dissensus. But later I realized that, while we clearly did display dissensus, when it arose we shut it down rather than explore or even acknowledge it, as contact-zone theory encourages. We were committed to agreement. We had not been trained to listen for or embrace conflict publicly. Rather, we diffused it. Cutthroat academic debate is often satirized; yet, in even the most contentious department I have been part of, disputes were couched in nods and restatements of opponents’ positions such that it took time and care to discern actual points of disagreement. Magda and I had few models to work with. It was in the car on the drive home where I slowly came to understand just how vexed the issue of accents was for her, and she recognized my conflicted attitude toward students like Lynn, whose paper I fretted (rather than “gushed”) over. In other words, our understanding of the other was enriched largely because we were neighbors.

As a method for listening to what others say, a rhetoric of listening attends to attitudes toward conflict and consensus in order to help us find ways of belonging amidst (not in spite of) multiple perspectives. Whereas Trimbur's model of dissensus similarly emphasizes the multiple voices that can be heard behind a semblance of consensus, a rhetoric of listening also attends to how listeners’ own positionality—especially the positions of “student” and “teacher”—can influence attitudes toward listening. A rhetoric of listening attends to audience as well, by considering not just who listeners are (a traditional concern of rhetoric), but how speakers conceive of their listeners. For instance, it was only in the part of the course that officially belonged to the teachers that students engaged conflict, generating the rich, reflective discussion on accents and assimilation. In the part of the course where students actively planned their presentation, there were early considerations that the project did not need to offer new tutors “answers,” but could offer ideas, such as positing Severino’s three political stances toward ESL tutoring as all valid ways to look at the issues. But these considerations were soon squelched by concerns that new tutors would feel “pressured” to choose a position and that this political material was “almost too deep.” Rejecting “just laying it out” as an “ambiguous” approach that would offer new tutors choices with no real answers, they reminded themselves of the need for “summarizing” and appropriate “presentation format.” In other words, their understanding of pedagogical genre encompassed an attenuated listener. They were persuaded that to
belong in front of a classroom required "answers" and unity. But then, in their own classroom, conflicted instructor discourse had subsumed itself, also assuming listeners who sought agreement.

Moreover, through its attention to how authority influences listening, the rhetoric of listening retrospectively helped me to work through my ultimate disappointment with the ESL project, which showed students listening sophisticatedly as students and narrowly as teachers. Class members delivered a polished, nicely choreographed performance, but one that highlighted tutoring tips, most of which were not unique to ESL tutoring. A significant portion of the final presentation relied on outside expertise, which came most notably in the form of an interview with a faculty member whose specialty was ESL teaching—an "expert" with officially sanctioned knowledge and power. In fact, this interview, touting a very pragmatic, grammar-conscious approach to working with ESL students, probably altered the final presentation content and contributed to the loss of "ambiguity." And more acceptance of ambiguity was precisely what I'd been hoping for. What I wanted was for tutors to develop a tutoring style sensitive to the needs of both assimilation and home cultures. I wanted them to consider questions of belonging as central to tutoring as grammatical error. I wanted them to import an acceptance of all three of Severino's stances into their tutoring, and then export it to their tutor training of the next crew. They wanted training to be straightforward and useful. They did not want to "operate on the edge" (Boquet 81).

The expert they relied on had no tutoring exposure, but perhaps students were swayed by her institutional authority as much as her content knowledge. After all, the expert was faculty, and we, their instructors, were not. Notions of authority also influenced how they perceived their "subjects," the ESL students. Lilia said of the ESL students they would interview, "We almost have an idea of what they're gonna say, because we've already scripted the questions beforehand." She had closed her capacity to listen to differences before the interview had even begun. Tutors allowed themselves to be scripted by experts, and they simultaneously scripted the responses of those whom they felt expert about. The rhetoric of listening makes note of how hierarchy can obstruct productive listening, learning, and speaking.

What the rhetoric of listening tells us here is how differently tutors belong depending on which side of the classroom they sit. And how differently they hear and conceive of hearing on each side. Magda and I gave our class two conflicting messages, both invested with teacherly authority. Our classroom presence was multivoiced and discontinuous. It therefore demanded a complicated listening response from students. No clear direction was being offered, no edict, but two passionate stagings of views
that, if not quite contradictory, then at least offered no clear pedagogical solution. Yet students rose to the occasion. They listened—and spoke—with complexity and subtlety. They listened both receptively and resistantly. They debated where they fit in the politics of assimilation and simultaneously questioned the utility of labels like “assimilationist” as too confining and not reflective of the hybrid nature of actual practice. Magda and I asked the students in our tutoring course to be students and teachers, to listen and speak. And as students they did listen and speak, hearing divergent messages with a sophisticated, problematizing ear. But the troubling finding here is that when they shifted to teachers, their approach to listening narrowed. As teachers/speakers to an audience of new tutors (an audience they had been members of only a few months before), they produced a monolithic consensus of factual nuggets. They student-listened with complexity, but teacher-listened simplistically, assuming new tutors would only hear a unified front of succinct, easy-to-process tips and not an array of continually shifting stances and choices.

But the issues ESL students face are “deep,” political, and, often, ambiguous. Tutors need to see such discussion as integral to tutoring, and to see both themselves and ESL students as capable of such discussions. Tutors need to be able to ask a student how she feels about her accent, about joining the academy, about language practices in her home. And they need to be able to truly hear her answers. In my most recent attempt at tutor training, at a private, urban institution, I have focused on the latter. I have explicitly asked tutors to join me in defining a rhetoric of listening, and have engaged them with written exercises called Listening to Yourself (analyzing a taped session), Listening to Another (observing another tutor), Listening to Scholarship (writing a summary), and ultimately, a Philosophy Statement. Sometimes this work is uncomfortable. At times listening feels like “listening in” on others’ conversations uninvited. As my syllabus states, “We should all expect—and accept—some awkward moments.” Quite a few tutor Philosophy Statements attempt to identify a specific kind of listening they try to attain in tutoring: “interested,” “patient,” “present.” One tutor finally found her tutoring authority as a listener, a role she accepted much more easily than “writer.” Another tutor adapted her life philosophy of Christian love to tutoring, offering tutees unconditional attention with a “non-reciprocal love of redefined listening.” Listening proved especially useful with resistant tutees: “You need to listen to what they aren’t saying and then how they do say things when they end up speaking. Listen for what they get excited about or what they seem discouraged about and you will most often find that one thing to be the key to the session, the key that will get the student engaged in the session.” This approach to tutor training has yielded responses
very different from that of the tutor who couldn't fathom what to listen for.

We need to consciously engage a more intentional pedagogy of belonging that considers how and why others listen, how one's self listens, and how these conditions affect what gets said. This process requires meta-discussion of what just happened in the classroom in order to clarify student–student, student–teacher, and teacher–teacher interaction. In Magda’s and my classroom, a rhetorical self-evaluation would have asked all of us to consider our ways of listening and speaking as students and teachers. Then students could have worked toward a reassessment of their audience’s listening capacity and thus allowed themselves to find ways to speak about ESL tutoring that would have enabled their audience to more productively confront crucial issues regarding how ESL students and Writing Center tutors belong. I now see my role as teacher as responsible for highlighting multiple ways of listening for belonging as part of the rhetorical exchange. I now spend more time listening to how my tutors listen. Tutor training can prepare tutors to work with cultural difference by encouraging an understanding of listening as a rhetorical activity that can make students and teachers more cognizant and sensitive listeners and speakers.

NOTES
1 While the choice is certainly not either/or, and critics like Bizzell have argued fervently for some sort of balance between home and school cultures, my point here is to demonstrate the degree to which literacy can be both freeing and constricting.
2 See Ratcliffe and Ballif, who both explicitly call for a reappraisal of listening. Grimm uses Gemma Corradi Fiumara to consider “authentic listening” (67, 69). I explore some of the ways traditional rhetoric has slighted listening in my unpublished dissertation. Although it is under-theorized, the trope of listening is quite prevalent; a flurry of recent composition scholars rightly chastises us for not hearing our students (see Fox, Listening; O’Neill and Fife; Strickland).
3 The names of my colleagues, students, and institution have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
4 In the tutor-training course, there were seven upper-level undergraduates and one graduate student, all female. One student was African American, one was Asian American, and six were white; there were two Greek speakers, one of whom had been educated in Greece first, although she was American. Magda and I were both white, and, respectively, Polish and American. Two students were mothers of small children. The age range was between 20 and 29. All students were working toward high-school teaching certification, and the tutoring experience was required for certification.
5 Because she was one of the first ESL writers I confronted as an instructor, Lynn’s writing had caused me turmoil at an early point in my teaching career; what I perceived as the severity and frequency of errors in her prose contrasted sharply with the poignancy of what she had to say and the strenuous effort she put into each assignment. Therefore, I had particularly strong and mixed emotions about the paper.
6 Excerpts of discussion reported in this essay are taken from electronic course bulletin boards and from transcripts of three taped class sessions. All have been used with permission. The three class sessions (out of fifteen total) were chosen because this was when students would be discussing their ESL project. I was not always present during the taped discussions.
WORKS CITED


Murphy, Christina. Rev. of *Noise from the Writing Center,* by Elizabeth Boquet. *Writing Lab Newsletter* 275 (January 2003): 5–9.


