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Introduction to "Multicultural Voices: Peer Tutoring and Critical Reflection in the Writing Center"

by Nancy Maloney Grimm

In 1991 when Diana George, Ed Lotto, and I were publishing our first issue as *WCJ* editors, this multivoiced essay struck me as a prime example of our editorial belief that writing centers could be “agents of change in the academy” (2). For a number of reasons, the vision of writing centers as change agents has been a lot harder to enact than we imagined. As Gail Okawa and Tom Fox observe, “Most universities are inhospitable to more democratic definitions of literacy” (41). The notion that writing centers might leverage the knowledge gained from working with cultural and linguistic diversity also ran into staffing challenges. When writing centers are directed by untenured or non-tenure-track people, the idea of challenging assimilative expectations is unrealistic. There is also the persistent vision of writing center work, first articulated by Steven North, that our job is to intervene in students’ composing processes, not in academic assumptions about literacy. Most importantly, when our undergraduate tutors are primarily mainstream, well-assimilated students, the desire for systemic change is truncated.

The latter point is precisely where Okawa and Fox started: recruiting students of color to work in their writing centers and designing a tutor education program that encouraged them to reflect on their school experiences and to imagine changed practices. In this essay, four tutor/authors of color reflect on the literacy lessons that taught them to erase, lie about, and suppress their cultural backgrounds in order to be “good” students. Lucy Chang, for example, tells about writing and illustrating one of her first poems

when she was eight years old, a poem about a Korean riddle often told by her grandmother. The result “horrified” her teacher who consulted her parents about Lucy’s “abnormal state of mind” (46). Shana Windsor writes about how her quest for academic success forced her to “leave my culture behind,” exactly what her American Indian elders feared would happen (49). Moreover, the energy it took to “shed one world” caused her fragile academic success to dissipate (50). Frank Bella Chavez, Jr. writes about his literacy education requiring him “to become like those who hated and despised my family and me” (57). In particular, he remembers when his desire to discuss the cultural relevancy of Hugo’s character Jean Valjean to his experience was ignored by a teacher intent on turning a literature class into an opportunity to teach grammar to Frank and others like him. LaGuan Hayes explains he learned to “disguise myself in the language the instructor and the literature put forth” because “honesty was unbecoming in certain social contexts” (61). He reports that his cynical self came to Tom Fox’s tutor education class in need of “rehumanizing” (63).

Nineteen years later, the homogenizing social forces that created negative literacy experiences for these tutor/authors are still strong. Although we have plenty of multicultural readers to use in classrooms, as a field we have yet to develop practices, principles, and genres that encourage student writers to represent bicultural experiences, to articulate their cultural backgrounds in ways that attain academic validation, and to connect literacy with meaningful personal aspirations. English studies has yet to relinquish the restricted rule-governed emphasis on Standard English for a more flexible recognition of multiple Englishes, and thus we have not yet found ways of teaching and tutoring that recruit rather than erase the multiple subjectivities of students.

Fox and Okawa show us where to start. Change in the academy can begin in a writing center at the level of recruitment and tutor education. As Tom Fox said in a recent personal email, “Certainly we (in writing center studies) advocate for underserved students, but I’m not sure we’ve been effective in showing those same students the possibilities for leadership in our field.” Gail Okawa concurred, commenting on the “inadequate progress made by the profession on

such issues.”

I hope that “Multi-cultural Voices” will not be read simply as a collection of narratives about individual triumph over adversity or as a report from unusually successful tutor educators. In 2010, we gain more from reading it as challenge to focus our change-agent aspirations at the level of our taken-for-granted assumptions about tutor identity and recruitment practices and to initiate structural change right in the writing center itself.

Happily, the other republished essays in this thirtieth-anniversary edition create the intellectual context for a new reading. John Trimbur, for example, calls attention to the vision of literacy education offered by the New London Group, who propose leaving behind a pedagogy “restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (61). Harry Denny proposes that “queering the writing center” can teach tutors “to read the communication situation for safety and possibility for subversion” and to locate opportunities where students can “invoke dialects as part of introductions and descriptions of personal experiences, or . . . trade upon identity as a means to push frames of reference for their audience and subject matter” (113). Nancy Welch offers the theoretical conception of a writing center as a place of “critical exile” in which writers can gain critical distance from social norms and find space to reflect on and intervene in systems that protect received knowledge.

There is clearly a persistent reappearing thread of change-agent aspiration in writing center scholarship, an aspiration that becomes less idealistic and more realistic when we start changing the things we can, such as the linguistic, cultural, racial, social, and disciplinary diversity of our undergraduate staff. As other introductions in this anniversary issue indicate, much of what we can accomplish in writing centers has to do with how we construe the contexts in which we work. We can respond to the regulatory expectations in those contexts or we can queer those contexts and imagine different social futures. Frequently we can (and must) do both.

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