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Lisa Zimmerelli

## A Place to Begin: Service-Learning Tutor Education and Writing Center Social Justice

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### Abstract

This essay shares the results of an assessment of a writing center community partnership that suggests the efficacy of service-learning tutor education for social justice. Descriptive coding of reflection essays from three semesters of the tutor education course revealed four themes: first, an increased capacity for connection and identification; second, a recognition of reciprocal, mutual learning; third, the development of civic identity; and, fourth, the prospect of transfer, as tutors articulate explicitly how their service-learning experiences significantly alter their daily practice of tutoring in the writing center. The study suggests that this model of service-learning tutor education is transformative in the way that Nancy Barron & Nancy Grimm posit: multi-directionally, and both within and beyond institutional bounds. Because it facilitates intellectual, social, and civic engagement, service-learning tutor education enables tutors to develop cross-racial and cross-social class affiliations and empowers our service-learning partners, Baltimore city high school students, to claim their rights to educational opportunities and situates them as partners with the tutors.

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Transformation, if it is going to happen at all, will happen in multidirectional ways, in no predictable time frame, and often in spaces beyond the institutional gaze . . . The writing center provides a space for hope, a place to begin.

Nancy Barron & Nancy Grimm (p. 76)

When I began directing the writing center at Loyola University Maryland five years ago, I was new to the Jesuit educational tradition and intrigued with how “mission” permeated so many areas of campus life. In my pre-Loyola academic life I had helped craft various writing center or departmental mission statements, but those ventures had a mainly communicative function: detail in as few words as possible the scope and purpose of one’s work. Usually these mission statements gave a nod to a particular pedagogical philosophy, but they were not spiritual by any stretch of the imagination. “Mission” at Loyola was different, and I was struck by the sense that I was entering a tradition that engaged students—and ideally faculty, administration, and staff—at a deeper level, a tradition that expected the acknowledgement of the power of a person’s spiritual connection with their intellectual inquiry and work.

Being new to this myself, I did what many teachers do: I asked my students to help me figure this out. In one of the final weeks of my first semester teaching *Writing Center Practice and Theory*, I asked students to list the various Jesuit ideals and to connect those ideals to what they had learned all semester about writing center work. On both a theoretical and practical level, they were able to map writing center practice and theory onto the Jesuit principles they had heard on campus and seen on syllabi countless times: Discernment, Community, Magis, Eloquentia Perfecta, Cura Personalis.<sup>1</sup> Our conversation that evening was engaging, with the tutors making tangible connections between their writing center work and the mission of their university.

A striking omission in the conversation, however, was discussion around the Loyola University Maryland “core values” of Justice, Service, and Diversity. This surprised me for two reasons. First, Loyola supports a thriving Center for Community Service and Justice, and most students take at least one service-learning course and/or volunteer on their own. Second, writing centers have a rich tradition of fostering

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.loyola.edu/about/mission-vision-values> for detailed definitions and historical contexts for each. Loosely translated, Magis means striving for something greater, Eloquentia Perfecta means perfect or ideal speech, and Cura Personalis refers to consideration for the whole person.

social justice work, whether in implicit, counter-hegemonic ways, or via explicit advocacy.

In the rhetorical silence surrounding “justice,” “service,” and “diversity,” I saw a missed opportunity and a clear obligation to make our writing center work more congruent with the mission of our university, and, in the process, to engage our writing center with the broader, national conversation on writing center social justice. To that end, I signed up for a service-learning faculty workshop and transformed *Writing Center Practice and Theory* into a service-learning course.<sup>2</sup>

Four years later, this course resembles very closely the first iteration of our service-learning partnership. At Loyola University Maryland, tutors prepare for writing center work in a 3-credit, 300-level course offered in the Writing Department. The practicum component to the course requires the students to tutor other Loyola students in the writing center for two hours every week, a requirement typical of many tutor education courses. But this is not the service that counts as their service-learning requirement; rather, to fulfill the service-learning requirements of the course, students commit an additional two hours per week to tutor Baltimore high school students.<sup>3</sup> The Baltimore high school students are part of a local program called *Bridges*, an intervention and enrichment initiative.<sup>4</sup> Our modest role in the comprehensive Bridges program is to help students who *could* be college bound *stay* college bound by tutoring them in whatever subject they struggle with and by hosting workshops on SAT prep, college discernment and selection, and college application essay development. We do all of this in

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2 I wish to acknowledge that the term “service-learning” has been recently problematized, particularly in the inherent hierarchy that the word “service” suggests, and many choose to use “community engagement” instead. Although I see the Loyola/Bridges project as fitting under the umbrella concept of community engagement, I identify it as “service-learning” for one primary reason: Both within the literature and at my institution, service-learning is still the primary signifier for the kind of arrangement I set up in the writing center, with service tied to requirements of the course. For two excellent collections that provide critical analyses of service-learning, see Butin (2010) and Stewart & Webster (2011).

3 For a description of service-learning at Loyola University Maryland, see <http://www.loyola.edu/department/ccsj/servicelearning/about>. For the most comprehensive list of service-learning resources, see The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at <https://gsn.nylc.org/clearinghouse>.

4 Started and sponsored by St. Paul’s School of Baltimore, Bridges is a program that began as a summer “bridge” program for elementary school children in Baltimore public schools. It has since grown to include full-year support programs for elementary through high school. See <http://www.stpaulsschool.org/page.cfm?p=825> for more information.

our writing center, closing early every Wednesday evening to host the 12–15 Bridges students on our campus.

In this essay, I share course assessment results that suggest the efficacy of service-learning tutor education for social justice. Using descriptive coding of tutors' reflection essays from three semesters of *Writing Center Practice and Theory*, I discuss how service-learning can support their recognition and understanding of the spectrum of human experiences and identities. Specifically, the essays reveal the development of identification, collaborative learning, and civic identity over the course of the semester. Moreover, the tutors articulate explicitly how their service-learning experiences significantly alter their approaches to tutoring all students in the writing center. I thus suggest that this model of service-learning tutor education is transformative in the way that Nancy Barron & Nancy Grimm posit: multi-directionally, and both within and beyond institutional bounds.

In identifying our service-learning writing center program as a social justice project, I situate my discussion of service-learning tutor education at the intersection of scholarship on composition service-learning and writing center social justice. With their fluid borders, these fields already overlap in enormously productive ways. In the brief literature review below, I highlight particular ideas and theories that frame, extend, and complicate my assessment of tutor development in the Loyola/Bridges program.

But first, a word about my own subjectivity. I am a white, middle-class woman who only started naming and interrogating her own race and class privilege about fifteen years ago, during graduate school. I am conscious of, sensitive to, sometimes paralyzed by the ease with which I can cast my experience as universal. I consequently hesitate to use the first person plural pronoun in this essay because I know I cannot speak for all; my writing center colleagues of color or from working class backgrounds may have very different encounters with community engagement literacy efforts. I thus contribute this essay as *one* perspective on writing center community engagement and as an invitation to others to engage in future dialogue.

### **Service-Learning in the Writing Center**

The benefits of service-learning to the composition classroom have been well-documented; they include higher quality papers, increased civic engagement, a bridged gap between “town” and “gown” writing, and

improved motivation and satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> Composition teachers looking to incorporate service-learning have a plethora of resources at their disposal: journals such as the *Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, and *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*; dozens of essays on service-learning published in composition journals; edited collections (Cooper & Julier, 1995; Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 1997; Rose & Weiser, 2010; Cella & Restaino, 2013); and books (Watters, 1994; Deans, 2000; Mathieu, 2005; Goldblatt, 2007; Flower, 2008; Rousculp, 2014).

Within this robust body of literature, writing center service-learning scholarship makes up a relatively small piece of the pie. Some writing center faculty and staff who have committed to various iterations of community justice work—be it tutoring in prisons, providing job application support, and the like—have begun to document that work, making the case for the benefits of service extending from the writing center, often in the form of community writing or literacy centers (Cooper, 1994; Rousculp, 2003, 2005; Elwood, Murphy, & Cardenas, 2006; Isaacs & Kolba, 2009; Brizee, 2014; Rousculp, 2014; Wells, 2014).

Notably, a subset of this scholarship speaks to the benefits of service-learning for tutor education (DeCiccio, 1999; Green, 2001; Condon, 2004; Green, 2004; Spillane, 2006; Gorkemli & Conard-Salvo, 2007; Moussu, 2012; Ashley, 2013). A prevailing theme in this scholarship is the transformative power of service-learning in helping tutors begin to see, understand, and negotiate the myriad differences—age, gender, race, sexuality, class—they encounter on campus and beyond, and to see these differences as generative and dynamic. As Al DeCiccio (1999) explains: “The fact that writing centers are naturally suited for service learning programs that develop a social imagination for promoting constructive change shows that writing centers are not the next best thing to writing instruction or writing instructors, but the best next thing in education—period” (6). In this way the tutor education service-learning classroom is also a site for social justice.

## Writing Center Antiracism

The demographics of the Loyola/Bridges service partnership frame our encounters in profound ways. Our writing center staff reflects our cam-

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5 For a comprehensive overview of service-learning and composition, see Karen Johnson’s “Service-Learning in First-Year Composition: Programmatic Approaches and Measurable Effects,” WPA-CompPile Research Bibliographies, No. 10, 2010.

pus: predominantly white and predominantly middle to upper class.<sup>6</sup> All of the Bridges students to date have been African American and economically disadvantaged. I have actively recruited students of color as peer tutors in my five years at Loyola University Maryland, and the demographics of our center are finally shifting significantly; however, at the time of my data collection, only two of the 30 tutors identified as African American. The rest identified as white, and the majority, both white and African American, identified as middle or upper class. Regardless, however, of the writing center's demographics, it is worth noting that the Loyola tutors reside in and access a privileged environment: the well-resourced Loyola University Maryland. Alternatively, the Bridges students daily encounter a disadvantaged, disenfranchised environment: the Baltimore public high school system, and for the majority of them, families in economic instability and neighborhoods in distress.

Because the particulars of our arrangement in the Loyola/Bridges program bring to the forefront issues of race and class, the recent literature on writing center antiracism is particularly apt in my analysis of the Loyola students' reflection essays. A different campus in a different region with a different service-learning partner may foreground other sites of identity more prominently: for example, gender or disability or sexual preference.

In reviewing significant contributions to writing center antiracism, we can start by tracing the roots of writing center social justice work to the cultural diversity and awareness campaigns of the 1990's, many of which coursed through composition and literacy studies, winding their way also to writing center studies. Nancy Grimm, Phyllis Lassner, Marilyn Cooper, Judith Kilborn, and Margaret Weaver, among others, positioned the writing center as one place to begin to grapple with the complex matrix of gender, race, and linguistic difference. Because of this work, many writing centers modified their tutor education, attempted to hire a more diverse staff, and did their best to advocate the writing center as a "safe" place for a variety of student voices and experiences, all while simultaneously grappling with the accuracy and appropriateness of the term "safe" for the discursiveness of the writing center.

But about a decade ago a small but impassioned and committed group within the writing center community advanced the need to move beyond consciousness raising and awareness to antiracism activ-

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6 Loyola University Maryland is a Predominantly White Institution or (PWI), a college or university in which 50% or greater of the student enrollment identify as White. See Brown & Dancy (2010) for a history and overview of the term PWI.

ism. Kicked off by Victor Villanueva's 2005 IWCA/NCPTW keynote address, sustained in *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* (2007), theorized in *Facing the Center* (2010), and reinvigorated in *Writing Centers and the New Racism* (2011), the antiracism activism movement has challenged the broader writing center community to acknowledge that the racial dimensions of writing center work are real, often painful and ignored, but also potentially transformative.<sup>7</sup> This work clearly informed and inspired the International Writing Center Association's three position statements on "Disabilities," "Diversity," and "Racism, Anti-Immigration, and Linguistic Intolerance."<sup>8</sup>

In the remainder of this essay, I situate service-learning tutor education as a rich site for social justice work as it helps us—and our tutors—take the conceptual and theoretical framework of antiracism education and apply it to the day-to-day of writing center praxis. Indeed, I see service-learning tutor education as working within the "actionable" racial justice framework advanced by Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, & Neil Simpkins (2013). According to Diab, Ferrel, Godbee & Simpkins, making racial justice commitments actionable requires "(1) self-work and (2) work-with-others on both the (3) interpersonal and (4) institutional levels" (para. 23). As they explain, the dialectical interplay of these three components is critical for writing center staff to move beyond engaging "*just* in a 'critique of' or 'action against' racism"; rather, actionable racial justice supports "a positive articulation of 'critique for' and 'action toward' to keep our eyes on the *ought to be*" (para. 21).

In other words, actionable racial justice requires a deeper level of engagement and commitment with what can be challenging concepts and theories, especially for white students and teachers. The prospect of adding a social justice agenda to our writing centers requires a kind of intentionality and naming that for some of us—regardless of personal commitments to social justice or political sympathies with progressive policies—seems simply untenable. This is especially true for those in more contingent positions, at universities that identify as "conservative" or "religious," or working with student populations who openly resist anything that reads as activist or political. Or, for others, after it is all said and done—after the scheduling and the workshops and the faculty development and the daily problem solving—it is difficult to muster up the energy to also tackle racism, classism, homophobia, ableism,

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7 For a comprehensive summary and annotated bibliography of anti-racism scholarship, see Godbee & Olson (2014) "Readings for Racial Justice: A Project of the IWCA SIG on Antiracism Activism."

8 See <http://writingcenters.org/about/iwca-position-statements/>.



or sexism in our writing centers. Indeed, for those of us who occupy various subject positions of privilege, this choice not to act epitomizes that privilege.

And yet, as Nancy Barron & Nancy Grimm (2002) insisted over a decade ago, and writing center racial justice leaders such as Beth Godbee, Bobbi Olson, and Frankie Condon continue to remind us today, writing centers occupy a powerful institutional location, one simultaneously central and peripheral to other university policies and programs. As writing center administrators we are the keepers of this space: We can work within and around policies and programs; we can directly engage or skirt significant issues in our daily encounters with tutors and writers. But where to begin? I hope that in sharing my own entry point into what I see as critically important work, I can offer both a modest contribution and a humble invitation. I hope to further the work of those already deeply involved in U.S. writing center antiracism as I simultaneously provide a model of tutor education that invites others to explore the possibilities of social justice in their writing centers.

## Methodology

In her account of a writing center community service project in which her tutors were pen pals with local elementary students, Frankie Condon (2004) writes:

I must admit to some cynicism when I hear writing center directors describe in glowing terms some practice or set of practices with which they are currently enthralled. Therefore, I welcome you to engage as critical readers of what follows. I believe our discipline would be well served by some scholarship addressing writing centers and service learning. I'm so slaphappy about the Pen Pal Project, however, that I'm sure I'm not the right person to take a more measured look at it from a critical, scholarly perspective just yet. (para. 6)

Condon's invitation speaks to the necessity of empirical research to substantiate the gut-level response so many of us have to service-learning. Like Condon's pen pal essay, the scholarship on writing center service-learning predominantly *documents* the apparent benefits of community/writing center partnerships. Here, I offer a data-driven assessment that provides compelling connections between service-learning and social justice work.

Specifically, I used grounded theoretical methodology to inform my coding of the weekly reflections and final reflection essays from my students from three fall semesters of *Writing Center Practice and Theory*, 30 students in total from 2011–2013, and 323 documents. The weekly essays were private posts in our online learning management system. Students were asked to write a two to four paragraph weekly reflection on each of their service-learning tutoring sessions. The prompt for each weekly reflection was purposely generic, simply “Post your reflections on Bridges tutoring this week.” The final reflection essay asked students to find one article or essay on service-learning, education, or another relevant issue and to put their service-learning experiences in conversation with that essay.

Grounded theory was helpful for my analysis because as a teacher/administrator scholar I wanted to resist the temptation Condon speaks of—of seeing in the essays what I wanted to see, of proving the value of a partnership, that, like Condon, “has been the most joyful experience of my teaching, directing, and tutoring career” (para. 7). An inductive methodology, grounded theory enables a researcher to take either qualitative or quantitative data and derive from that data concepts and categories that then give additional meaning to the data.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, grounded theory supports *emergent* categories derived from the data as opposed to *forced categories*. In my case, I had amassed a significant qualitative data set through three-years worth of weekly reflections and final reflection essays.

As I read the essays each semester and as I casually talked to tutors about their weekly experiences, I knew that the service-learning experience was meaningful for my students, that it was significantly shaping their approaches to writing center work and affecting their general interactions with students who used the writing center. I sensed that these interactions were meaningful partly because of the demographics of the two partners. That is, I felt that the Loyola/Bridges program provided an opportunity for deep, meaningful encounters that might not happen otherwise, and that those moments together *mattered*. After being told again and again by the tutors that their weekly interactions with the Baltimore high school students were their favorite part of the course, and after also being repeatedly told by the Bridges students that coming to Loyola was one of the highlights of their week, I wanted to find out *why* and *how* through the data. And so I looked to coding.

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<sup>9</sup> For a prominent voice on grounded theory, see Barney G. Glaser. For a useful website, see <http://www.groundedtheory.com/what-is-gt.aspx>.

Coding is the foundational method of grounded theory.<sup>10</sup> As sociologist and preeminent grounded theory scholar Barney Glaser (1992) explains:

In grounded theory the analyst humbly allows the data to control him as much as humanly possible, by writing a theory for only what emerges through his skilled induction. The integration of his substantive theory as it emerges through coding and sorting is his verification that the hypotheses and concepts fit and work and are relevant enough to suggest. They are not proven; they are theory (87).

Simply put, careful reading with an open mind can yield interesting results. Moreover, “skilled” is an operative word in Glaser’s explanation, and a researcher can use a variety of coding techniques and technological platforms to read and analyze any given data set. As organizational theorist Judith Holton (2010) explains, the various coding methods considered substantive—open, selective, and theoretically saturated—all present unique opportunities and challenges to analyzing the data.<sup>11</sup>

I read the essays as openly as possible, first writing words and ideas in the margins as I saw them repeated, then color coding those ideas into possible themes. I read the service-learning reflections in the order in which they were written as the semester progressed, and then I reread them as a set for each student. Four themes emerged: first, an increased capacity for identification and connection; second, a recognition of reciprocal, mutual learning; third, the development of civic identity; and, fourth, the transfer of identification, mutuality, and civic responsibility to tutors’ articulated philosophy of tutoring and to their daily practice of tutoring in the writing center. These themes were consistent across all three semesters. I then re-read the essays, again in the same order that they were written, selectively coding them for these specific themes.

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10 For an accessible introduction to coding, see Saldaña (2009).

11 See <http://groundedtheoryreview.com/2010/04/02/the-coding-process-and-its-challenges/>. According to Holton, open coding is the process by which “the researcher codes the data in every way possible,” allowing themes and questions to emerge from the data. Selective coding occurs upon the identification of “a potential core variable” from the open coding. Such a variable then limits the study, and the data is reanalyzed through the lens of that core variable. Finally, theoretical saturation is achieved after “constant comparison of interchangeable indicators in the data yields the properties and dimensions of each category, or concept.” For my study, I used open and selective coding, but I would not claim theoretical saturation.

Despite the considerable availability of excellent coding programs, for the purposes of this study I chose to rely on a paper-based coding system.<sup>12</sup> My texts were relatively short and of the same genre (reflection essay), and I wanted to ensure that my coding was always contextualized within the point at which the reflection was written in the semester (since I was looking for development and not simply recurrence). Also, as a relatively novice coder working for the first time with these texts, I wanted to maintain a closeness to my data set and was hesitant to rely on an unfamiliar technological platform as a solo researcher. This was a decision derived more from personal preference than a kind of commentary on computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS).<sup>13</sup>

Because these essays were originally assigned for class as standard practice and not intended for study, my institutional review board did not request an application. Nonetheless, all Loyola University Maryland students across all three semesters were given the opportunity to have their data removed, and all names have been changed.<sup>14</sup>

The Loyola/Bridges program is a relatively young program, and this is the first assessment conducted. I am wary of the kind of linear, progressive narrative that my analysis of the data could suggest, that it could serve as yet another unproblematized salvific narrative coming from what Tiffany Rousculp (2014) calls a place of “educational benevolence” (54) and Tania Mitchell, David Donahue, & Courtney Young-Law (2012) identify as a normalized “pedagogy of whiteness.” For starters, I admittedly do not have many “difficult stories,” as Ann Green (2003) would call them; the rhetoric of the students’ reflections is strikingly positive. The experience of working through this data, drafting this essay, and reflecting on the past four years of the Loyola/Bridges partnership has brought to the forefront of my mind the need to more intentionally prompt productive conversations around class and race privilege in the classroom and through the various reflection exercises.

That said, the data does show what I would call “progress” in a movement toward greater cross-racial affiliation and emerging, evolving articulations of structural, systemic injustice. And although I do not

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12 The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign hosts a comprehensive online library guide detailing free, proprietary, and web-based programs that facilitate computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS). See <http://uiuc.libguides.com/content.php?pid=454781&sid=3726434>.

13 For such commentary, see Gibbs, Friese, & Mangabeira (2002).

14 Please note that the IRB process varies according to the institution; while Loyola University Maryland considered my data set “work generated for a course,” another institution may require a formal IRB application for a study like this one.

yet have data for this, I also believe, at a gut level, that my tutors are overall more present with students, more intentional in their advice, and more understanding of the nuances of the rhetorical situation that is each tutorial session. And so I share what follows with optimism and enthusiasm.

### **Moving from Fear to Community**

First, the essays indicate a shift in perception: from fear of the other and unknown, to surprise over interpersonal connection, to an assessment of intellectual capability, to, finally, a capacity for rhetorical listening and identification as community. Tutors' journal entries preceding the first Bridges meeting were overwhelmingly marked by anxiety. Eighty-seven percent of the students used a language of fear; tutors wrote that they were "nervous," "worried," and "afraid" of meeting their students. This anxiety ranged from fear of the "type of student" they would be partnered with to "how our personalities would mesh." Overall, the tutors' reflections indicated a sense of fear of difference; in one tutor's words: "I was nervous to be tutoring a group of students I seemingly had no connections with." Class discussions revealed that few white tutors had had significant meaningful interaction with minority students their age, and certainly even less interaction with the Bridges population of under-resourced African Americans. Thus, comments such as "If they were unmotivated, bored, distracted, or had a bad attitude, I was worried that ... it would be me putting in all the effort" reflected an anxiety borne out of both a fear of the unknown, and also a fear grounded in a societal racist stereotype of an indolent African American youth. Consistent encounters all semester helped my students dismantle such stereotypes; in fact, many tutors—15 of the 26 who originally used a language of fear—either commented on the dissolution of that initial fear or claimed ownership of the error of that fear, e.g.:

- "When the Bridges program was first introduced to me, I was very unsure of what to expect.... I can now confidently say that fear is long gone."
- "Reflecting now, I realize that my fear was unwarranted."
- "Though I entered the Bridges program with some unease, it is fair to say that it has been one of my favorite experiences at Loyola."

Such anxiety over initial mixed race encounters has been noted by writing center practitioners before. Lucie Moussu (2012), for example, describes her students' similar responses:

Initially, my ACS students expected the HS students to be “slackers” and to attend the meetings with a negative attitude.... As Karla wrote in her first tutoring reflection, “I had imagined that each student was from a lower socio-economic background, with personal baggage to contend with, and an attitude about learning that would be difficult to overcome. I was totally wrong, and I have never been happier to be so wrong in my entire life.” (p. 9)

Likewise, my students were quite happy to be wrong. Journal responses after their first meeting were markedly more optimistic and positive, and they contained a preponderance of surprise over shared interests. All 30 tutors wrote at length in their second journal responses about “everyday” kinds of connections—their favorite movie, favorite book, favorite sport, favorite Disney princess, etc.—and many used the term “in common” as they described this first meeting, with phrases like “We had many things in common, like interests and hobbies, and we were able to chat away from the start, just as I would with any of my other friends” and “We found that we have so much more in common! Theresa isn’t that much younger than I am, so it makes sense that we have similar likes and dislikes.” Admittedly, we always have an icebreaker that first evening that gets at some of these everyday points of connections—tutors and students did not realize this spontaneously. However, I do find it significant that all chose to highlight these common interests in their reflections.

In these same reflections, a majority of tutors—73%—also commented on the intellectual potential of the Bridges student with whom they were initially matched, writing statements like “She is a very bright and driven girl” and “I was able to make an initial and accurate judgment that she is very smart.” Of these responses, several also indicated surprise at the Bridges students’ intelligence, with comments like “I anticipated a trouble maker who would refuse to do work; however, I was pleasantly surprised by an intelligent and hardworking student who always [comes] prepared” and “I had never expected Greg to be so driven to experience the wonders life has to offer.” The almost hyperbolic assessment of the Bridges students’ intellect reflects a tendency to see the individual as an *anomaly* against a racist perceived cultural norm. Furthermore, none of the tutors questioned their ability and right to judge the intellectual capabilities of the Bridges students, e.g.:

- “[She’s] definitely a good writer ... she’s a ...very bright girl.”
- “I could immediately tell that Brenda was a very intelligent girl.”
- “She is such a smart girl with so much potential.”

The propensity to offer these kinds of assessments partly stems from the nature of a mentor/mentee relationship, particularly between the age demographics of college students and high school students. However, as Green (2004) argues, the slippage into paternalistic assumptions and attitudes is a real danger in service-learning partnerships involving youth, especially when the providers of service are predominantly white and the recipients of service are predominantly of color. Writes Green, “the relationship can so easily be top down, with the learners positioned as recipients of the knowledge from the ‘volunteers’” (p. 295). Green’s solution is to limit service-learning partnerships to adults in the community, as students are then less inclined to assume power over their service partner and more inclined “to develop relationships with the learners at their site that are more mutual and egalitarian” (p. 296). Indeed, Green calls such relationships “friendships,” the “one way that those in positions of either race or class privilege can share an investment in issues that are not ‘theirs’” (p. 296).

Although I certainly appreciate Green’s reason for avoiding partnerships involving youth, I found the close proximity in age (at any given time, only two to six years difference exists between any two Loyola and Bridges students) served as a strong basis for the development of relationships, friendships even. Indeed, the essays revealed a developed sense of interpersonal connection between the tutors and their partners by the end of the semester, as well as an articulated sense of community amongst the group overall. About 67% of the tutors used the word “together” or “community” to describe the service-learning evening: “This really helped us to form a community....and we would all talk and laugh as a group,” wrote one student. Another invoked the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and activist Thich Nhat Hanh: “‘We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.’ This quote from Thich Nhat Hanh encompasses the feeling of community that developed throughout our partnership with the Bridges students.” Still another connected the relationship-building to the Jesuit idea of “accompaniment,” writing: “In the community feeling that was formed through this service-learning experience, I saw the sense of accompaniment and partnership that is developed in tutoring. These experiences have clarified my view of service-learning: as a means of forming relationships and connections through which we serve and grow as a community.”

Although they were not in the majority, I was struck by how a few students each semester (11 of 30 students) moved by mid-semester beyond a sense of connection and community to what Rousculp (2014) has termed a “rhetoric of respect,” the development of a relationship “that is grounded in perception of worth, in esteem for another—as well as for

the self” (p. 24–25). Comments like “I realized I would not want to do work either if I was in her position” and “I struggle with [motivation] myself” indicate a breakdown of the implicit hierarchy and judgment of their earlier journal responses. Moreover, these tutors comment on their failure in the first few weeks of Loyola/Bridges tutoring to relinquish control and power over the tutorial session. Specifically, a few comment on their developed capacity to *listen* to the Bridges student, and through listening, to invite the Bridges student to articulate their needs and desires out of the evening’s work. In both their recognition of the uneven power dynamics and their subsequent and responsive modification of tutoring, these tutors were modeling rhetorical listening as Krista Ratcliffe (2005) has theorized it—the “code of cross-cultural conduct” and “stance of openness that a person may choose to assume” (p. 1).

### **Recognizing Reciprocal, Mutual Learning**

The second major theme that emerged from the assessment was the acknowledgement of reciprocal, mutual learning. Twenty-two of the thirty tutors commented on how they benefitted from the partnership in the development of their tutoring skills. Wrote one tutor, for example, “She became more confident in her writing abilities... and I became more confident in my tutoring abilities.” Moreover, many of the tutors explicitly name the Bridges student as the teacher; in other words, they identify that they are not simply learning from the experience, but learning from their Bridges peer. As one tutor put it, the Bridges students “train the tutors in a hands on way.”

This sense of mutual learning comes partly from the nature of our program. Bridges students often need help in subject areas that only a couple of tutors feel proficient in: biology, chemistry, calculus. Invariably tutors who have real math and science anxiety are forced to work with Bridges students who have real math and science homework. Therefore, the Bridges student is in the position to make the tutor feel less anxious and to bring the tutor up to speed on the content. Because of this, many of the comments invoked a language of collaboration, with words and phrases like “together” and “both of us.” For example, one tutor wrote: “She didn’t really seem to have an exact grasp of the lessons, rules, and subjects [of math]; I also realized that I didn’t either... However, we did it. The two of us worked out the problems together each with a pencil in hand.” Another wrote: “For a while *we* struggled... However, towards the end I felt like *we both* started getting a hang of things” (italics mine).



Notably, these comments on reciprocal learning are not limited to learning about tutoring; they also point to emotional growth. Thirteen students wrote about spiritual or social growth, e.g.:

- “I’ll benefit in spirit.”
- “I have been challenged academically and socially.”
- “I learned more about myself from Megan than Megan could ever have learned from me.”
- “Little did I know that throughout this semester program we would both teach each other, and grow together in our knowledge and understanding.”
- “He has allowed me to realize what I am capable of, just as I think I have allowed him to realize what he is capable of.”

In other words, the reciprocal learning is not manifested simply in the tutors learning how to tutor better and the Bridges students learning their high school course content better. Rather, tutors explicitly identify their interactions as teaching each other and learning from one another across the spectrum of their lives: academically, socially, and emotionally.

### **Identifying Structural, Systemic Injustice and Civic Identity**

The third major theme I discovered in my assessment was the emerging development of civic identity. Sixty-three percent of tutors at the beginning of the semester articulated a frustration with individual “bad” or “ineffective” teachers, focusing on specific classroom environments that negatively affect Bridges students, and writing comments like, “As a tutor, I did not blame Jena for having no work; I was more disappointed in her teachers” or “She tells me her teacher is from the Philippines, meaning that it is hard to understand him and most of the students don’t care to.”

By mid-term, and certainly by the final reflection essay, however, tutors rhetorically transitioned from blaming individual teachers to blaming the systemic problems within our educational system. Using phrases like “academic injustice” and referring not to individual schools but to “educational systems,” 77% of tutors used rhetoric that indicated a growing awareness of the complexity of the disadvantages their Bridges’ students encounter daily, e.g.:

- “Based upon my observations, Maryland’s academic ‘success’—though it may still be far better off than some other states—is in many respects a façade that masks some

very significant flaws in the system that should not be—and yet often are—ignored.”

- “Living in Baltimore it is often very clear that poverty, homelessness, and illiteracy plague the city; however, I was never before fully able to understand the significance of the Baltimore public school system in this cycle.
- Although they were certainly in the minority, six students then identified their potential role in affecting change. Indeed, one entire final reflection essay was devoted to civic identity, titled “Bridges and my Civic Identity.” Comments such as these demonstrate the power of this sustained relationship with Bridges students over the course of the semester: “I have begun to consider myself as a more active and engaged citizen, rather than a bystander” and “Bridges opened my eyes to issues in education, which I believe is ... important because to be an effective and informed citizen, I need to be aware of problems people face that do not necessarily affect me day to day.” After hearing story after story after story, they began to see the issue for what it was—a larger, more complex, more nuanced, and more pressing challenge of injustice.

### **The Prospect of Transfer**

The final theme that I identified as emerging in the essays was the prospect of transfer. In their final reflection essays, almost all tutors—83%—made comments that I interpret as signifying transfer of what they had learned in tutoring the Bridges students into the everyday practices of our writing center. I use the term “transfer” with intentionality... and a caveat.

First, the caveat. As Bonnie Devet’s and Dana Driscoll’s work in this issue of *WCJ* attests, transfer-of-learning research is robust, complex, and warrants a systematic methodology. My use of the term is more speculative; I interpreted certain phrases and words (e.g. “will easily be carried over” or “is applicable to”) as signifying the *possibility* of transfer of learning from the context of tutoring Bridges students to the context of tutoring Loyola students. To demonstrate actual transfer of learning, further study is warranted, study that would delineate and measure, as Devet and Driscoll describe, the various kinds of transfer of learning that I claim is evidenced in my coding (e.g. lateral vs. vertical, conditional vs. relational, DEC, PFL, etc.).

However, I use the term transfer intentionally because, as Devet and Driscoll remind us in this volume, writing centers have yet to engage fully in transfer-of-learning research, despite the fact that, to quote Devet, “Transfer studies and writing centers are made for each other” (p. 30). Moreover, I identified the final theme as transfer because the tutors clearly made a conscious effort (what Gavriel Salomon & David Perkins (1989) would call *mindful* or *high road* abstraction) through their reflection journals and final reflection papers to draw interesting and provocative connections between their service-learning weekly tutoring sessions and their Loyola practicum weekly tutoring sessions. As my analysis below demonstrates, the tutors themselves named and recognized this transfer, specifically how tutoring the Bridges students shaped their overall tutoring philosophy, helped them develop certain tutoring skills, and encouraged them to cultivate a particularly empathetic, open, and generous way of being with each other and with other student writers in the writing center.

For some students, the overall, general experience of the Bridges tutoring helped their overall, general tutoring skills:

- “I have found that interacting with the Bridges students has not only been enjoyable, but has also improved my ability to tutor peers in the Loyola Writing Center.”
- “The lessons that I learned from tutoring Bridges students will easily be carried over to future tutoring experiences with Loyola students.”
- “What I learned through tutoring Ava is applicable to tutoring sessions in the Writing Center.”
- Many more students, however, were much more specific about the exact strategies they could transfer to tutoring Loyola students. For example, one student wrote, “I feel it has given me the ability to recognize different learning styles relatively quickly, which becomes quite helpful when working in the Writing Center,” and another wrote “It also required us to expand our way of thinking and adapt quickly, which is necessary when tutoring in the writing center.”

Moreover, several of the tutors’ final reflection papers indicate a transfer not only of tutoring skills, but of a developed sense of connection. The following comments are representative of the deep impact the service-learning experience had on the tutors’ overall tutoring attitudes, behaviors, and philosophies, e.g.:

- “There are many behind-the-scenes components of academic success; this is something that I will remember whenever working in the Writing Center with Loyola students, as well. In my sessions, I will be aware that each tutee I encounter brings with them a unique story. Their writing process might have been disrupted by a personal situation.”
- “I’ve learned to understand different perspectives. Not everybody has the same writing style or background and through tutoring with Bridges, I have learned to be more accommodating while tutoring in LWC.”
- “I have learned to be engaged in each session—taking into account that the student is a whole person—with a lot going on other than the paper.”
- “Empathy is extremely valuable in tutoring because it allows tutors to understand their tutee’s position.”
- “Students at Loyola are struggling with personal issues and insecurities some similar and some different than those students in the Bridges Program. It is a tutor’s obligation to create an open environment where he or she is a listener and is there to serve.”
- “[The Loyola/Bridges program] encourages habits of caring, engagement, and civic responsibility amongst our tutors, and the program helps to shape our identities through adaptability and by giving us more informed perspectives when we approach tutoring with Loyola students. As a result of working with this service partnership, I am a more patient, flexible, and positive tutor.”

In my ten years of tutor education, the semester that I introduced service-learning was the first in which I heard students discuss this importance of *identifying* with the tutee, of trying to understand who the student is as a full person. And I was excited to see in these final reflections that we had begun to move beyond the fear of potential and realized differences—in our particular case, racial and socio-economic difference—to a fuller sense of writers as complexly human, as juggling a matrix of identities and problems and possibilities as they work through any given paper.

## Conclusion

Within the past decade, many in our community have challenged our current tutor education practices to reflect, respond to, and further

the work of antiracism advocates. Notably, Laura Greenfield & Karen Rowan's edited collection *Writing Centers and the New Racism* (2011) includes several essays that point to the central role of tutor education in encouraging students to cultivate a critical lens by which to address race and racism historically, institutionally, and structurally. The value of a "critical pedagogy for antiracist tutor education," write Greenfield & Rowan, is that it does "a better job of preparing tutors to recognize, understand, and grapple with the complicated ways racism shapes the collaborative work we do with student writers" (p. 125).

If we accept tutor education as the key mechanism for beginning to engage in antiracism work, then we must necessarily, as James McDonald (2005) and Steven Bailey (2002) remind us, also turn a critical eye to a primary source of tutor education: the tutor training handbook. According to McDonald, how tutor training manuals often address "difference"—even structurally, with "back-of-the-book" sections—sets up some students as more "normal" than others, belying our field's own theories, theories that instead offer nuanced and complex understandings of writers and their writing processes (p. 66–67). Bailey similarly argues that "contemporary tutor handbooks construct tutor identity as monolingual Euro-American and reinforce—however inadvertently—an array of dominant monocultural and monolingual assumptions that forestall productive negotiations with difference" (p. 5).

As a co-author of one of these handbooks, I have deeply considered McDonald's and Bailey's critiques, and in addition to significant changes to the 6th edition of the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (2015), I offer this service-learning assessment as another antidote to the potentially restrictive and prescriptive nature of the genre. I agree that tutor education is one place where tutors can learn to identify (and thus define) race and class as part of a dynamic social matrix that extends into and radiates out of the academic community. But I also fundamentally believe that we cannot simply talk to students about race and class and racism and classism; as Valentine & Torres (2011) remind us, antiracism tutor education must foster "genuine interaction" (p. 206).

A key aspect of "genuine interaction" in service-learning is reciprocity, the idea that the service-learning partners contribute and benefit equally in all aspects of the program. We are attempting to figure out a way to better assess the efficacy of the Loyola/Bridges program for the Bridges students; their responses to surveys are overwhelmingly positive, almost too positive. In order to gather more meaningful assessments and to facilitate reciprocation, in the fall of 2015 we will modify the program in two significant ways: First, the Bridges students will

also write weekly reflections and will collaborate with a Loyola tutor on the final synthesized reflection essay; second, the Bridges students will identify a community literacy opportunity in their neighborhoods and will work with our tutors to enact it.

These micro and macro adjustments to the program demonstrate the suitability of service-learning for reinforcing Barron & Grimm's assertion of the writing center as "a place to begin" antiracism conversations. They write, "But there is time to make room, to make spaces for memory...With more practice with diversity, more practice remembering it's not easy, more practice asking what all might be happening that I can't see, maybe, just maybe, we'll arrive at more humane confusion and recognize our dependence on each other" (p. 79–80). And my tutors and the Bridges students are practicing. It is their commitment to and connection with each other that shapes the program most: it was their idea to have "college night" after Bridges students told Loyola tutors, "I thought you needed to be on food stamps to get financial aid for college" and "what's a safety school?"; it was a Loyola tutor who conceptualized and drafted a proposal for a grant to sponsor research studying college perception within Bridges families; and the Loyola tutors and Bridges students keep the program running, showing up every spring semester when the tutor education course is not offered to sustain the Loyola/Bridges program until the next fall. Our service-learning partnership is grounded in a commitment that enables us to grow together: On a weekly basis throughout the year, we are always in contact.

The writing center as a contact zone is a trope that has been called up a countless number of times. And yet it remains a useful metaphor because it highlights the very basic, fundamental idea that contact matters. Encounters matter. Messy, ugly, beautiful, real, painful encounters matter. Over the past three years, when Bridges students and Loyola students meet every Wednesday evening, I witness the exchange of hugs, of tears, of crossed, defiant arms, of fist bumps, of hands on shoulders, of hands within hands. These points of contact are real and physical. Moreover, they reflect the work happening beyond the epidermal: the heart work, the mind work, the intellectual, social, and civic engagement that enables tutors to develop cross-racial and cross-class affiliations—and empowers Bridges students to claim their rights to educational opportunities and situates them as partners with the tutors. In short, through service-learning tutor education, the writing center is a place where we can center social justice and see the ripples extend out. It is, indeed, a place to begin.

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