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### Considering Strategies for Appointments with ELL Students:

A Provocative approach to an often-discussed aspect of the Writing Center

#### **Introduction**

Writing centers are places of cooperation and collaboration; a place where all student-writers should feel comfortable asking for and receiving peer input on their writing. However, not all students experience the same supportive environment in the writing center; collaboration is a distinctly different process for different students. At the Trinity College Writing Center (TCWC), student-writers from a wide swath of backgrounds seek collaborative feedback on their writing. While these students are from a diverse array of countries, many from Chinese, Spanish, and Arabic speaking countries, this paper will (somewhat irresponsibly) group students who are in the process of becoming English proficient into a single category. Though English Language Learner (ELL) students are not a majority of TCWC clients, they have a strong presence. While nearly 80 percent of the 2017 clientele at the TCWC was composed of non-ELL students, those students only represented 60 percent of appointments. This means that the 20 percent of TCWC clients who are ELL students make forty percent of the appointments (“System Statistics Report: SEPTEMBER 1, 2016 TO OCTOBER 22, 2018”).

Being an ELL student at a U.S. institute of higher learning is not easy. Students are required to leave their home and come to a completely different place that is often thousands of miles away (of course, there are ELL students who have lived in the U.S. for years before

enrolling) where their peers and educators speak a different language. Because ELL students have to simultaneously learn new material and a new language, they often have a harder time with assignments than their non-ELL peers, especially writing assignments. There is so much that happens on a college campus, especially at Trinity, that demarcates ELL students as different, as outsiders. The writing center should be one place where this is not the case, but we have yet to achieve that goal.

Generally, writing center literature separates English Language Learner (ELL) tutoring strategies into a separate category of research and pedagogy. However, this paper will argue that the differences in the ways we work with ELL students essentially come down to operating in a productively collaborative manner. Based on both writing center literature and my own empirical observations working as a Writing Associate at the Trinity College Writing Center, this paper will explore the differences in the ways that the writing center and its employees interact with different types of students, especially English Language Learners and non-ELL students.

It is important to explain my own academic and social backgrounds before exploring my interactions with student writers from different backgrounds. I was raised on the east coast by two white, educated parents, both of whom have PhDs in psychology. My father works as a research scientist and my mother is in practice for herself as a child and family clinical psychologist. I attended an elite public high school in Massachusetts. In short, I am a white, male, upper-middle class sophomore from New England, attending a private, elite liberal arts academy.

The reason for explaining my background, one that is not unusual for a Writing Associate (the majority of TCWC Writing Associates are white, female, and speak English as a native language), is to point out just how different my life has been than that of most first-year ELL

students walking into the writing center for the first time. When another student from a background like mine walks in, I zero in on things we have in common. I especially identify with first-year's like me, going through the silent, independent struggle of adjusting to college. For me, this meant academic success paired with social isolation, boredom, and homesickness. When student-writers like this come in for appointments, I spend time asking about their first-year seminar, social life, and adjustment to Trinity's culture. I might find out where they come from, who their football team is, and what they want to study. Much to my chagrin, I am fully aware that I do not make this same effort to reach out to the ELL students I tutor. I never made a conscious choice to treat this group differently, nor do I care less about the ELL student-writers that I work with. Social psychology points out that, as humans, we are naturally drawn to similar people, offering a surface-level explanation for why the space might manifest differently for different groups of people (Bahns, Crandall, Gillath & Preacher 334). More important than the "what" and "why" of these differences is the question of how we think about appointments with ELL students and the broader idea of collaboration as a whole.

When I first sat down to write this paper, I made the mistake of conceptualizing difference as a detriment. Evidently, a life of leftist politics, three years of a long-term interracial relationship, and my time at a liberal arts college had failed to adequately drive home the lesson that seeking to achieve sameness is not only a fool's errand but is quite often a harmful pursuit. The flaw in writing center literature and education, I would argue, is not in the way we interact with ELL students and the differences presented between ELL and non-ELL appointments; rather, the problem is in the segregation of the two concepts. Strategies for working with ELL students should be understood as a fundamental part of the collaboration that is at the root of writing center pedagogy.

### **Collaboration in the Writing Center: An Individualized Constant**

In his revolutionary 1984 piece “The Idea of a Writing Center,” Stephen North introduced the idea that writing centers ought to “produce better writers, not better writing,” laying out the philosophy of collaboration within the writing process at the writing center (438). Together, these ideas are a critical part of the identity of writing centers today; however, since North’s article, centers have struggled to define the ideal manifestation and scope of collaboration. One of the pitfalls of peer tutoring is that the tutor, whether an undergraduate student, graduate student, or otherwise, will always have more authority in the relationship with the student-writer (with the interesting and insufficiently explored exception of appointments in which the student-writer is also a writing tutor). On the surface level, the authority in the peer relationship of tutor and student-writer appears balanced, but the tutors in the writing center settle into a role somewhat different than that of a peer (Carino 96). First, tutors are more comfortable in the space; the student-writer enters a new space and sees half a dozen new faces, whereas the tutors spend hours in the writing center and know everyone. Secondly, the student-writer often sees the tutor as a superior writer and student than him or herself (Carino 96).

Because constructive collaboration is difficult to achieve, writing center literature has created instruction manuals in the form of scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. These tend to fall under the hypothetical category of how to structure tutorials to minimize authority and maximize student-writer participation. For example, “Training Tutors in Emotional Intelligence: Toward a Pedagogy of Empathy” (by Noreen Lape), “Theory in/to Practice: Addressing the Everyday Language of Oppression in the Writing Center” (by Mandy Suhr-Sytsma and Shan-Estelle Brown), and “Portrait of the Tutor as an Artist: Lessons no one can Teach” (by Steven Sherwood) are three relatively different pieces that offer advice for how the tutor ought to

behave to make the most out of sessions. They each address different issues in the *general* relationships between tutor and student-writer. They work together, alongside hundreds of other articles, to make the point that collaboration looks different in every session. One tutor might work with six writers in a day and each time she would structure their cooperation differently. Similarly, one student-writer might work with six different tutors over a semester, and he would find that all six sessions were different. Collaboration in the writing center is a constant, but it manifests uniquely in every appointment.

### **An Unnecessary Subdivision**

This paper takes issue with the establishment of a category of writing center pedagogy that deals separately with ELL student-writers. This category of research both explicitly and implicitly tells us that we should consider working with ELL students as an entirely separate challenge as working with non-ELL students, the fundamental assumption here is that the general lessons of collaboration established by the aforementioned writing center literature is insufficient in informing strategies for working with a variety of unique student-writers. In her article “Bridging the Gap: Essential Issues to Address in Recurring Writing Center Appointments with Chinese ELL Students,” Frances Nan “focuses on suggestion that tutors might consider bringing to their work with Chinese ELL students” (50). Her essay focuses on taking a more directive approach with ELL students (as opposed to the hedging strategies that tutors frequently use) and addressing the fact that tutors feel less comfortable in sessions with ELL students (51). This comes with the further assumption that sessions between ELL students and writing tutors are inherently broken, or at least less effective than those with non-ELL students, as evidenced by the section heading “Suggestions for Improving ELL Writing Partnerships” (55). The article goes on to suggest strategies to make sure the student-writer comprehending the tutor’s input.

This includes asking the student-writer to take notes, reading those notes, and making sure they align with the content of the session (59). This kind of babysitting behavior is simply belittling and would never even be considered as a strategy for working with non-students.

Of course, I am not arguing that there are no common differences between appointments with ELL students and those with non-ELL students. Terese Thonus finds that ELL students are, on average, less engaged in writing center tutorials (230). She finds that ELL students have more extreme understandings of their tutor's authority. They can be, in general, less likely to push back against the tutor or defend their ideas than their non-ELL counterparts. Additionally, the language barrier cannot be ignored; ELL students may make different mistakes than students who have grown up reading and writing in English. In 2015, Trinity College Writing Associate Emily Turner created a piece called "Language or Culture? A Tutor's Approach to ESL Appointments," which includes guides to the differences between English and the other common first-languages found at Trinity, like Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Spanish (11-18). This has been a valuable addition to the Rhetoric 302, the TCWC tutor training class, because it gives tutors a (very) basic understanding of what ELL students struggle with. Turner also emphasizes the importance of viewing a student-writer's background as a positive influence and not as a negative influence on his or her writing and academics (6). She identifies the flaw of a large portion of writing center literature, that it problematizes ELL students, describing their non-English background as a hinderance to their writing, their collegiate experience, and their communication.

### **The Convergence of Collaboration and ELL Pedagogy**

While strategies for working with ELL students are imperative for writing center tutors to understand, confining this literature to its own separate category is detrimental to the way we

think about the inclusion of ELL students in the writing center. The collaborative process *does not* exist independent of strategies for working with ELL students. Rather, the ideology calls for tutors to tailor their attitude and methods for each individual student-writer with whom they work (Carino 103-108). If tutors are meant to cater to an individual student's needs and learning style, ELL students should be included in "students." However, by creating a separate category for literature relating to ELL students, we subconsciously exclude this population of students from the generic ideologies of the writing center. Thus, it becomes apparent that when Carino and others use the word "students" to refer to the general clientele of the writing center, they are only referring to non-ELL students. To make a dramatic comparison, this point is similar to the United States Declaration of Independence's use of the words "all men" when laying out basic rights, when it really only referred to property owning white men. The literature of the writing center, in its current original state, is not, in itself exclusive; however, when another category of literature had to be created in order to include ELL students, the exclusivity of the former category of literature was revealed. To use once again the comparison to the founding documents of the United States, one would find little evidence of racism and sexism in the articles of the Constitution (excluding recanted phrases such as the fugitive slave clause and the three-fifths compromise), but the amendments, many of which aim to correct racist and sexist wrongdoing, make it clear that the original system was flawed.

There is room for ELL strategies underneath the umbrella of collaboration; they should not exist on a tangent outside of it. Collaboration calls for peer tutors to vary their approach depending on how the session is going (Carino 109). In a specific example, Peter Carino suggests that tutors should be able to sense when an appointment calls for a directive approach and when an appointment calls for a non-directive approach. Altering your approach based on

the behaviors, challenges, and communications of the student writer is, in essence, what ELL strategies are. However, when we compartmentalize these strategies into a neat subdivision of writing center pedagogy, we tend to overapply and to overgeneralize them. To return to my personal experience working with ELL students, I often fall into the trap of prejudging ELL student-writing. I might recognize that a student is from China and assume that a certain type of mistake is going to recur in his or her paper. This applies to other writing associates as well. In fact, just recently, I was working in the writing center without an appointment, listening to another session. The tutor was working with a student who had brought in a paper written by a classmate that he was supposed to peer-edit. Apparently, he had decided to bring it into the TCWC to have a tutor do it for him. Halfway through this unorthodox session, the tutor in question said “well, a lot of these mistakes seem like common ELL mistakes; does that...seem right?” Without even really thinking about it, the tutor had made a broad, generalizing comment that offended most of the other people sitting in the TCWC at the time. The tutor in question has made it abundantly clear that, in his or her (gender excluded to maintain confidentiality) mind, there exists a separate set of practices, advice, and values for ELL students.

This, finally, brings us back to the point that the writing center presents differently to ELL students than it does to non-ELL students. We have to believe that, if tutors hold separate belief systems and exercise separate practices for students from English speaking homes and those from non-English speaking homes, that student-writers will come away with different conceptualizations of the what the writing center offers and what the space represents.

**Implications: How this Work has the Potential to Affect, Tutor Training, the TCWC and Broader Writing Center Pedagogy as a Whole**

If collaboration and ELL tutoring strategies are examined as two separate arenas, neither can be fully understood. In the TCWC tutor training course, two classes are specifically dedicated to learning how to work with ELL students. I would not suggest diminishing the amount of ELL tutoring strategy training that TCWC Writing Associates receive; however, these classes should incorporate nods back to North, Carino, and other general writing center articles covered in the course. Rather than casting the days in which the class focuses on ELL strategies as different or as a break from the regular course material, they should be canonized into the literature. Furthermore, while the course already warns against overgeneralizing the lessons about ELL students and specifically those from Asiatic countries, there needs to be further emphasis on the fact that each student-writer needs to be approached as a unique individual. Training a tutor to see a student who looks Chinese to prepare for a certain set of errors is too simplistic. Simply bringing these issues to the attention of Writing Associates early in their training process will enhance their metacognitive ability to analyze how well or poorly they interact with ELL students. Since I started researching this piece, I have been much more aware of the differences in how I treat and collaborate with student-writers from different backgrounds than my own. If more of the Writing Associates at TCWC became more aware of differences in how they treat ELL students, including informal conversation that we have about ELL students in the writing center, we would move away from today's image of two writing centers: that seen by the ELL student and that seen by everyone else. The writing center should not treat everyone the same; as all of the literature indicates, everyone should be treated differently to establish the best tutor and student-writer relationships. However, the writing center and its staff should make sure that that uniqueness is offered to every student who walks through the door, and that the safe, cozy home-space of the writing center is available to everyone.

This argument's implication for writing center literature boils down to demanding that articles about writing centers no longer pretend that the majority of students who walk through a center's doors are native English speakers. An article about space design in the writing center that ignores the different authority dynamics experienced by students from different cultures would be incomplete, an article about emotional intelligence in the writing center that fails to consider different expression of and comfort with public emotion among students with non-American cultural backgrounds would be incomplete, and an article about the writing process that overlooks students who make their outlines and notes in a different language would be incomplete. ELL students make up a significant amount of appointments in writing centers, and thus deserve a seat at the table when authors and researchers design to write about centers. The writing center canon needs to be more inclusive of ELL students, even when discussing general matters that do not, at the surface-level, relate to ELL student-writers. In this case, silence about ELL students in the center is equivalent to exclusion.

### **A Final Word: Taking a Step Back**

Discussing difference within the confines of a private elite liberal arts academy is never easy, especially when the institution, its faculty, and students fancy themselves politically moral and socially progressive. On the college campus, difference tends to be subverted; we convince ourselves that, because we all made it here, live in the same housing, and eat in the same halls, that privilege is almost non-existent. Of course, our classroom discussions breach the subject of privilege off the campus, but we rarely investigate the manifestation of privilege within the gates of Trinity. I would hypothesize that the massive inequality in college admissions, which gets significant national attention, blinds society to inequalities on college campuses. There is a false sense of sameness established on the college campus, because everyone there has made it

through the flawed admission process. We, as college students, faculty, or community members, have a responsibility to understand the perpetual presence of difference and inequality on campus.

The (college) writing center dynamics mirror the college campus in this way; despite the fact that everyone in the writing center is a college student, writer, and seeking feedback on work, there are massive differences between the various student-writers that come through any writing center, especially the TCWC. While this essay has focused entirely on two groups (ELL students and non-ELL students), difference within the writing center extends further than that. In his essay “Composing Queers: The Subversive Potential of the Writing Center,” Jonathan Doucette examines how the writing center fails to be fully accepting of queer writing. For a space that claims separation from the “-isms,” a place where anyone who writes is welcome, the writing center has a lot of room to grow. There is no “main” population of writing center student-writers. There is no “most students” and the “others.” There is no group at all. The writing center is a constructed safe space that provides productive collaborative input to each and every unique student-writer who comes through the door.

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