ABSTRACT

“IDENTITY ISSUES”:
TUTOR IDENTITIES, TRAINING,
AND WRITING CENTER COMMUNITIES

by Siobhan Teresa Watson

This paper discusses the issue of writing center tutors’ claims to identity, as well as how those identities are changed by their training to become writing center tutors and the writing center community at large. It is based in a person-based study for which interviews were conducted with four volunteer tutors-in-training, as well as an anonymous online survey taken by five volunteer experienced tutors. The participants’ interviews and survey responses are discussed and analyzed in conjunction with writing center literature. This paper also provides suggestions for improved writing center practices.
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AND WRITING CENTER COMMUNITIES

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Dedication

To my mother, whose hard work has both enabled and inspired my own education—

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Thank you.
Chapter 1:  
Shifting Identities, Shifting Focus

Situating Myself

I sat idly, just a few minutes into the Monday evening shift at my undergraduate writing center, the only peer tutor without a scheduled appointment for the 5 o’clock hour. The tiny basement room seemed to buzz softly, the productive sound of conversations all about me filling the air. As I looked about the room, I noticed a girl storm through our door, slightly crumpled paper in hand. She demanded an appointment. And as the receptionist obediently pointed her in my direction, I knew I was in trouble.

She smacked her paper down in front of me and launched into a heated explanation of why she had come before I could even ask her myself. She’d just left her first-year composition class where she’d been handed back the paper now curling in front of me, covered in red ink. Her professor—a professor that I also had at the time, and who I liked—had informed her a bit bluntly that her personal narrative lacked any real analysis, any real connection to her readers. Obviously hurt and confused, she asked if I cared about her story about a sports competition won against the odds, or if I agreed that there was no appeal to a broader audience, no analysis (read: if I took her side, or the professor’s).

I gaped awkwardly and somehow made it through our session, though afterwards I felt drained, strained, and somehow different.

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It’s been almost four years since that tutoring session, but that girl, that scenario, has never left me. Shameful though it is to admit, I initially used to relay the story in almost a ‘round-the-campfire sort of way, a tutoring horror story of the walk-in gone awry; I didn’t understand why I felt so disquieted by the session, just that I wanted it to never, ever happen again. But what did—what does—that story mean? Why do I carry this writer with me even now, a ghost lurking in the corner of my memory?

Following much reflection and many conversations with coworkers and scholars alike, I’ve since been able to locate the real crux of my discomfort in the moment—the lasting power and unresolved business, perhaps, still fueling the phantom even now. This session was the first in which I was forced to identify with both the writer and her professor—the first session in which my allegiances were tested and transformed by knowing both parties. I could see what the
writer meant and why she was upset; I could understand what the professor meant and why he was displeased. It took what was a simple *us vs. them* situation and turned it on its head—did I stand with the *us* (the students), or with the *them* (the teachers)? It was, in short, the first time that I experienced firsthand the very complicated nature of my position within, and responsibilities to, the university.

Stepping back for a moment—much has changed for my own identity since that session in my undergraduate writing center. I’ve changed institutions and centers, for one, but more importantly, my own institutional position has changed. When I initially came to Miami University¹, I didn’t tutor at all; instead, I taught in my own classroom for the first time, taking on the role of teacher that had once been so easy to dismiss or even actively work against as “just” a tutor. I tried my hardest to instill writing center practices in my classroom (peer review, allowing students to negotiate assignments to meet their interests, etc.), to let my love for composition guide me, but it felt a bit like playing dress-up—sure, I was in front of the room with my teacher clothes on, but underneath I still felt like the same old writing center tutor I was.

Shortly thereafter, though, I came back to the writing center world. During my second semester, while I continued to teach (and came to *enjoy* teaching) composition, I began to tutor again in the writing center. The conflict of identity then was undeniably daunting. Everyday called back to mind the story above—now not only did I understand and sympathize with both students and their teachers, but I *was* both a student and a teacher, and a tutor on top of all of that. I tried to alleviate these tensions by being frank with my own composition students about my dual role, and explaining the limitations of those roles—like many other folks walking the teacher/tutor line, I made it clear to my students that they were not to bring work from our class to *me* at the writing center, though they were free to bring it to others—anything else would have felt a bit like defeating the purpose of the center’s peer-to-peer mission in the university.

Even still, though, strange tensions rose to the surface. I had a student of mine bring work for another class to me in the center—something I had never expressly disallowed, but something I wasn’t wholly comfortable with either—and since all other appointments were full, I

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¹ At time of writing, I was in the second year of my MA at Miami University and a graduate assistant in our writing center.
² “Sit beside the student, not across a desk—that is where job interviewers and *other authorities* sit” (Brooks 130, emphasis added).
³ The names of my interviewees—in this chapter, Will and Alicia, and in Chapter 3, Emma and Jen—are pseudonyms either selected by the interviewee or assigned afterwards by me.
⁴ Earlier in his article, Denny interestingly positions writing center directors particularly in the
essentially had to allow. There I was—to go along with my dress-up metaphor—in my tutor clothes, working with a student who still expected me to be her teacher, whose expectations for our session clearly did not match my own. Another student never made an appointment with me (or any other tutors, to my knowledge), but still insisted on popping in during my shifts to loudly say hello, each time insisting on calling me Ms. Watson in a space where I was just Siobhan. It made me feel neither fully tutor nor fully teacher, as though the safe, seemingly discreet niches I had carved for both parts of myself crumbled before my eyes.

Though I grew more comfortable in both of my roles as the semester went on, including the ways in which they did and did not overlap, I still jumped at the chance to take a graduate assistantship in our center, abdicating my role as a teacher entirely. Yet, even now that I’m fully immersed in the writing center world again, things are not as they once were. I consult with writers, but I’m also in charge of more administrative tasks, like running workshop meetings, observing consultants and providing feedback on their consultation strategies, and even managing the newest cohort of tutors. It places me again apart from not just writers—in the way that, really, all tutor-writer relations do, as I will discuss later—but from my fellow tutors, as well.

Small moments of conflict have always emerged—furtive, unsure glances in my direction when complaints are made about tutoring sessions or how the center is managed or even the weekend’s indiscretions—but now that I have taken on my researcher role in the project now at hand, they have seemed to grow greater in magnitude. My identities of both writing center researcher and writing center tutor-turned-administrator seem at times to wrestle with one another, reminding me of Neal Lerner’s recollection of the “unrest” he felt when involved in research at his own writing center, where he, too, was in a position of power that, in many ways, seemed to preclude any pretenses of pleasant objectivity. As he writes in “Insider as Outsider: Participant Observation in Writing Center Research,”

I was not merely studying a site where I worked, where I had ‘insider’ status, because by the time my first year had passed and I was ready to being collecting data for my dissertation, I had partial responsibility for hiring and training more of my colleagues. I was both participant and observer, and, at times, the overlapping nature of those roles seemed a source of anxiety and confusion rather than a means of completing a successful study. (Lerner 58)
As I collected interviews for the project at hand, for instance, it was clear that the tutors-in-training weren’t quite sure what to make of me. Our first interviews felt stiff, though over time, as we began to see more of each other in the writing center, the interviews became more candid and even friendly. Yet still, in one of my final interviews, as the watchful red eye of the recorder blinked on, a tutor who I had thought was quite comfortable with me balked when I asked with whom he discussed his consultations—a question that had been answered without hesitation with the previous interviewees. He started, stopped, and looked suspiciously at the tape recorder and back, at last, to me. “Is this a trick question?” he asked. “Because I know I’m not supposed to talk about my consultations with other people…”

Though after a bit of assuring—pinky swearing, even—that it was something “we all do,” and that it was most certainly not a trick question, he finally described talking to a parent about consulting and writing in general. I shared a similar story and we moved on, though I felt for the first time the identity of Siobhan-the-graduate-assistant had overlapped glaringly, annoyingly with the other identities I was trying to embody at the time: Siobhan-the-researcher, and even Siobhan-the-coworker. It was the same participant-observer problem that faced Lerner, above: tutors that were otherwise able to get along with me were “confused” and even “anxious” about my new role and what cooperating with that new role might mean for them.

It would seem that my own identity—in the writing center and in the university at large—is constantly in flux, a bricolage of identities in truth, held together somewhat miraculously (if tenuously) in the one mind I possess. Yet my position in our writing center allowed me to have a unique vantage point—I could still identify with the tutors, but again, I could identify with professors and writing center administrators, too. I was able to help push my fellow tutors into reflective practices and advocate for them in their times of need. I was—and hopefully still am—in a position to help change our center (and perhaps other centers, as well) for the better.

**Identities in Text: A Brief Literature Review**

Discussions of student-writers’ conflicts of identity—like my own, above—have been well established throughout composition. David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” for example, discusses specifically how beginning student-writers are called to invent the university every time they sit down to answer a prompt; they must pretend they are members of the community into which they are writing in order to successfully complete their assignments. He writes: “The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse… They
must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will more certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned.’ And this, understandably, causes problems” (403).

There is one particular problem left undiscussed in Bartholomae’s text involved in “carry[ing] off the bluff”—as Donna LeCourt writes, based on Sharon Crowley’s *A Teacher’s Guide to Deconstruction*, in *Identity Matters: Schooling the Student Body in Academic Discourse*: “…the self is more easily erased by the intertext [such as the voices of teachers and other sources of discursive authority] into which it is trying to write itself” (9). That is, as students begin to play at the different identities they are called to embody as they write, they may begin to overwrite their previous identities—they may be “interpellated,” as in Althusser’s discussion, whereby individuals are constructed by the institution around them in ways that appear positive but that may obscure the ways in which they have been forced into such constructions. This is not to say, of course, that some manner of growth that student-writers enter and go through in college isn’t to be expected or celebrated; merely that the discussion of this growth has the potential to hide the institutional forces that can, at times, coerce them into forgetting or belittling their own pasts in favor of joining the academic community. And thus, while LeCourt is sure to discuss the ways in which students do often willingly identify with and throw themselves into new communities (and forsake old ones), it’s clear that this is not always the case.

Within writing center studies, Nancy Grimm takes up such complications, as well, arguing in *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times* that the traditionally modernist university system holds student-writers—and the writing centers designed to help them—back from achieving their full potential by upholding the myth of the independent, isolated student-writer with a neatly defined “unitary self” (73). Using a postmodern lens and critiquing Kenneth Bruffee’s assertions about peer tutoring in “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” she argues that “when peer tutoring is conceptualized [in modernist traditions] as an effort to help students ‘loosen ties to the knowledge community they currently belong to and join another’ (Bruffee 12), it doesn’t take into account that students live in multiple communities that can be in profound conflict…” (12, emphasis added). Bruffee’s (modernist) notion of peer tutoring is cast as an extension of the university’s homogenizing mission—one that denies the multiple communities to which students may already belong.
Grimm thus pushes for a fuller understanding and incorporation of postmodernism—which, she says, will allow writing center practitioners, theorists, and tutors to better complicate the “modernist evaluation criteria of clarity, coherence, and focus [which] do not readily encourage students to explore the slippage between the identities their assignments call for and the identities formed by their lived experiences” (55). This postmodern view would rather have tutors help writers explore those “slippages,” and find ways to incorporate what they know—their lived experiences—with what they are called to learn in meaningful ways that resist the modernist institution.

Though much of what Grimm poses does resonate with me, I can’t help but wonder how attention to tutors’ own identities—particularly tutors’ perspectives—could help bolster or debunk some of her arguments. Her primary focus on tutors’ own conflicts comes in her treatment of Anne DiPardo’s “‘Whispers of Coming and Going’: Lessons from Fannie,” an article that discusses the cultural disconnect between a well-intentioned (minority) tutor and the Native American student-writer with whom she worked across a semester. Grimm describes the tutor, Morgan, as an “idealistic tutor eager to ‘spark’ something in Fannie [the student-writer]”—and as an African-American tutor who could just as easily be read as a “sincere white middle-class tutor in Anywhere Writing Center” (65). She writes further that Morgan’s misunderstanding of Fannie is due to “having internalized the process of social regulation […] and feeling] compelled to renew the status quo” (66). Grimm’s statements seem to suggest that a minority tutor like Morgan shouldn’t feel that way, that her allegiances are misplaced. The case of Morgan calls attention to the student-writer’s conflicting identities at the expense of the tutor’s maybe be an oversight in DiPardo’s article, but it seems odd that Grimm would generalize the tutor’s actions without having her perspective on the matter.

Thus, while Grimm’s over-arching argument—that writing centers should embrace postmodern theory to help them complicate the modernist universities in which they work—is compelling, and while I do agree with her assertion that writing center folk should help student-writers explore the gaps between what they have lived—the communities to which they already belong—and what they are “learning,” I find myself troubled by the lack of attention to tutors’ identities and perspectives. What are the complexities facing tutors, and how do they feel “interpellated” by the university—or even the writing center itself? In what ways are they
encouraged—or discouraged—to “explore the slippage between the identities” that they maintain and the identities called for by the writing center?

Enter Harry Denny’s “Queering the Writing Center,” grounded in the queer theory tradition of making apparent (and questioning) the hegemonic practices and the oft-hidden beliefs behind them, encourages the interrogation of both tutor and writer identities—and identity (re)formation—in writing center work. Evoking the strategies of “passing” and “coming out,” Denny argues that the sharing writers are asked to do in the writing center is akin to a “coming out”—in that they are making public what they do and do not know—and that writers are often coming to the writing center to bolster their abilities to “pass” in the academy—to play the traditional role expected of them in academic discourse, even if they do not quite fit the role or agree with what it requires. To begin to assist the writer in her needs, then, the tutor should be encouraged to “out” herself—to describe her own journey and struggles “passing” and acquiring the necessary tools for academic discourse. In this way, tutors, too, expose (and hopefully, further explore) their own identities, and make apparent the ways that they have struggled, and why.

But becoming complicit in helping writers only “pass” in the system does them an injustice and serves to defend the system; Denny builds on Grimm in suggesting that to avoid this risk, tutors can help writers look for areas of flexibility, areas in which writers are free to “play” and creatively experiment (277). A tutor, then, becomes “…that middle person [who] helps students navigate an academic terrain,” and helps the writer to “discover… new routes to self-understanding and awareness of the world” (283).

Denny continues this train of thought in Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring, in which, as the title suggests, he brings facets of identity—including the impact of race, class, sex and gender, and nationality—to the forefront of his discussion. Unlike his previous article, which seemed to focus primarily on the student-writer’s identity, placing the tutor’s identity exploration in service of the student-writer’s, Facing the Center seems, as a whole, to allow for more much needed attention to tutors’ own often conflicted claims to identities both apparent and concealed, accepted and shunned by the university. As he writes, “[i]n the move to foreground identity, I commit to the principle that the center, like the margin, has a face and needs interrogation and mapping” (3). That is, even those whose identities may appear to be the most normative, that “seem to exist and perform beyond or post identity”
as many tutors certainly do, are in need of interrogation, as well—including the ways in which tutors’ identities (or expected identities) are portrayed or made available through writing center training texts.

Yet, perhaps due to the resistance of dedicating writing center studies solely to tutors’ identities beyond the practical “how-to,” the topic of tutor-training is almost never critically studied, particularly with questions about identity (re)formation. How does the training offered to tutors—or, in my writing center background, required of—call them to shift identities? Deborah Britzman’s *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach* in some ways fills this gap in both Denny’s and Grimm’s texts; though her text is crucially different in its focus on student-teachers and their experiences, nearly all of her discussion seems readily applicable to the experiences, learning, and work that tutors have and do. One of the most problematic ways that student-teachers are bound—as are writers in the discussions above—is that they are both faced with the complex task of “negotiating, constructing, and consenting to their identity as … teacher[s]” (220) and encouraged to “‘shed’ their own social casings and personal preferences in order to uphold the discourse of objectivity”—an objectivity which is, of course, patently false (235). They are, then, not truly encouraged to construct an identity made up of old and new, but rather, in some ways, pressured to forge a new identity entirely—one which fits into the pre-established discourse of teaching.

Thus, Britzman argues for a “dialogic understanding of learning to teach,” which encourages an explicit examination of one’s own situatedness in teaching (including the tension between the “normative” and the more varied, “dialogic” discourses), which “may well allow prospective teachers different choices in understanding and reconstructing their teaching selves” (238). This push for flexibility in teacher-training ultimately, then, promotes an understanding of practice not merely as the means to an end—experience, perfection, etc.—but rather as both a “process and becoming,” which has no end (239). While these suggestions are certainly compatible with those Grimm makes—suggesting that many scholars, even though outside of writing center studies, have long been calling for postmodern, flexible understandings of all students in the university—there are again areas left unexplored, though Britzman’s study of student-teachers certainly provides some new directions for similar inquiry applied to writing center studies and tutor-training specifically: how can we both encourage tutors to embrace and explore their own identities—whatever they may be—while still teaching them to be effective,
helpful tutors? Or, perhaps more pressing, do the ways we discuss becoming a tutor encourage flexibility—or do they merely silence tutors and encourage routine behaviors and over-simplified versions of self?

On this subject, writing center literature falls curiously quiet—there are few articles focused solely on tutor-training texts. In “Separation, Initiation, and Return: Tutor Training Manuals and Writing Center Lore,” Harvey Kail uses the anthropological-turned-psychoanalytical lens of “separation, initiation, and return” to examine the writing center narrative created by three canonical tutor-training texts—Harris’ Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference, Bruffee’s A Short Course in Writing: Composition, Collaborative Learning, and Constructive Reading, and Clark’s Writing in the Center: Teaching in a Writing Center Setting—in an effort to lay bare the various moments depicted in writing center lore, particularly the lore surrounding the recruiting and training of new tutors. The evoked themes of the resulting narrative are “alienation and reunion [particularly between student and teacher], social and cultural transformation [of the tutor and later the student, through the tutor], marginalization and eventual validation [of the tutor’s role and writing center work]” (94)—suggesting, of course, a normative, linear order of writing center business.

While much of Kail’s analysis through this lens is a bit caricature-esque (and even a bit humorous), he does successfully show how these purportedly no-nonsense training texts do actually contain many unstated claims about the tutor’s experience of the center and what writing center practitioners and theorists believe about the writing center overall. What still remains to be discussed, however, is how looking at—and reflecting on—this internalized lore can help writing centers progress or help tutors-in-training negotiate their multiple identities and roles both in and out of the center.

Peter Vandenberg, too, looks at training texts in “Lessons of Inscription: Tutor Training and the ‘Professional Conversation.’” Critically looking at the two primary types of tutor-training texts—the “practical” and the “professional”—Vandenberg calls for a reinvestigation of the ways writing center administrators—through said texts—train their tutors. Ultimately, he finds that practical texts often obscure the theoretical underpinnings for the practices they preach, encouraging tutors to lose sight of their positioning within the university, as well as the ways in they are granted—or are expected to achieve—institutional authority. Professionally focused texts, however, promote theory as a means to understand practice—though “trainers” must be
careful to challenge the authority many tutors-in-training are likely to grant to theoretical pieces on the sole basis of being authored, published, and, well, theoretical. By pushing tutors-in-training, then, not only to join the professional community, but also to join and critique it through the “professional conversation,” writing center administrators can encourage an investigation of “their implication in an intensely competitive economy of literacy” (95)—coming back to both Grimm’s and Britzman’s suggestions, as well.

Though they discuss tutor-training texts, neither Kail nor Vandenberg broach the subject of how the job of tutoring is described, or what, exactly, tutors are told to do. Many other authors have, however, taken up what tutors are told to do in connection with their complicated relationship with power and authority. Tutors are told time and time again throughout their training and in the texts aimed at them that their job is, as Linda Shmann and Deborah Burns summarize in “A Critique of Pure Tutoring,” “to help clarify what is in the text and to facilitate revision without imposing their own ideas or their own knowledge and […] without taking ownership of the text,” limiting them to “a script that is question-based and indirect” (227, emphasis added). These tutor-training mainstays quickly become mandates, as set forth nowhere more clearly than in Jeff Brooks’ “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work,” in which he argues that writing tutors should do, in effect, as little as possible beyond getting a writer to discuss his or her own text so that “[t]he student, not the tutor […] own[s]” the paper and take[s] fully responsibility for it” (129). By using appropriately “nondirective” tutoring techniques, his foundational argument seems to follow, any nasty effects of power inequalities between writers and tutors can be mitigated and a writer can somehow maintain sole “ownership” of her text.

Yet, helpful as that advice-turned-dogma can be, the peer practices (like open-ended questions) often taught to tutors might help, but certainly well never erase, the issues of power and authority in the writing center tutorial. Within Brooks’ own article, there are prominent discrepancies in how tutors are told to identify and how they are told to behave. For instance, he implies that tutors are not authorities, but directs them to take rather authoritative actions—e.g., “Have the student read the paper aloud to you…,” “…make the student find [errors]…,” “…give the student a discrete writing task…” (131). Brooks additionally posits tutors as “outsiders,” as

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2 “Sit beside the student, not across a desk—that is where job interviewers and other authorities sit” (Brooks 130, emphasis added).
though a tutor were devoid of any of her own relevant experiences, free from context and the bothersome weight of identity and authority.

Yet, many writing center scholars, such as Catherine Latterell, Peter Carino, and Alice Gilliam et al., argue that ignoring these power differentials in favor of presenting a false picture of a neutral writing center wherein all members of the tutoring situation (tutors, writers, administrators, teachers) are equally empowered and have been given the same kind of authority, as in Brooks’ and Bruffee’s work, is doing both writing centers and the students they help a great disservice. These scholars claim that rather than bringing such power differentials to the forefront, many writing center practices tend only to sweep them under the rug by enforcing “peer” practices and strongly discouraging—if not outright banning—more directive methods.

As writing center scholar Catherine Latterell notes in her article “Decentering Student-Centeredness,” the way writing center practitioners and theorists typically describe “student-centeredness” tends to construct power in fixed ways—either ‘power [is] property” to be “turned over” to the student-writer, or “power is a zero-sum concept” in which the tutor must “give up” her power to the student-writer (112-114). These understandings of power, as demonstrated in Brooks’ article, lead to over-simplified concepts of what student-centered tutoring is and how to establish it by forcing binaries (either tutor has the power, or the student-writer does) rather than exploring complexities (both the tutor’s and the student’s power and authority is shifting at any given time). I would add that these binaries make it difficult for tutors to understand their own role not only in the tutoring session, but also in the university at large—as the authors above note, tutors are in many ways told to banish their conflicting identities (particularly their own identities as students) as soon as they step within the writing center space.

Similarly, Alice Gilliam, Susan Callaway, and Katherine Wikoff argue in “The Role of Authority and the Authority of Roles in Peer Writing Tutorials” that in some tutoring situations, the ideal non-direct, facilitative maneuvers touted by training manuals and taught in training courses simply don’t hold up. The authors additionally assert that mandating tutors to use solely non-directive methods can also cause tutors who do have to resort to more teacher-like, directive methods to feel a sense of shame or anger with themselves, preventing them from seeing the necessity or success of such strategies—complicating tutors’ understandings of their place in the university and the role that they are supposed to take on.
Yet, perhaps more dangerous than training tutors to be resistant of—and feel guilty when using—their own claims to authority, writing center practitioners and theorists may be giving them a false sense of being removed from a power-laden situation. That is, tutors may be unaware that the very act of choosing *not* to alter their strategies (to more directive ones), they *are*, in fact, claiming authority and maintaining control—control of what they deem best for writers, and of how the session should proceed. Building on Gilliam et al., Peter Carino seeks to debunk the myth that writing center tutors are authority-less peers in “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring,” arguing that such lore is not only deceptive (and, in most cases, plainly false), but also potentially harmful to both tutors and the writers they work with. He argues that though this “rhetoric of ‘peer-ness’” is found in most writing center literature—perhaps due to the oft-tenuous position writing centers face in the university, and a certain unwillingness to claim authority—it is nonetheless problematic because it hides (and can prevent) instances of necessary directiveness or expertise. Further, Carino notes, directive moments already take place, though tutors taking a more directive and less “peer” role are often marginalized by current literature—an issue somewhat paradoxically perpetuated in his own article, which lacks tutors’ voices and perspectives. This rhetoric may additionally be a reason for the lack of attention to tutors’ identities and conflicts—as will be discussed in Chapter 2. If tutors are constructed solely as “peers,” the argument seems to follow, tutors are free from conflicts and confusion regarding their roles in the university, and thus there is little need to engage their conflicts.

Further, in “Intellectual Tug-of-War: Snapshots of Life in the Center,” Elizabeth Boquet begins by calling attention to a lack of scholarship on the moments writing center tutorials go wrong or are less than “ideal”—especially noting the lack of such accounts written by tutors themselves. She then proceeds to reflect on the performance role of the tutor as well as how institutional positioning (often seen as at the “margin of the margins”) and traditional tutoring techniques can align tutors and even the writing center as a whole with faculty, rather than students. Ultimately, she joins the authors above in calling for more discussion of tutor authority, particularly written by tutors themselves, in order to attain “more humane working conditions for everyone involved (tutors and students alike)” (29)—though she also does not provide tutor’s stories herself.

Nancy Welch also discusses the necessity of tutors’ own tales in “The Return of the Suppressed: Tutoring Stories in a Transitional Space.” Welch turns her attention to the
discrepancy between the “ideal” stories often given to tutors to read in training—like the dogma discussed earlier—and the “real” stories that tutors told and wrote as they became more immersed in the daily practice of tutoring in her own tutor training course. While the conflict between the authorized “ideal” stories and underground “real” stories could be easily reduced to the routine theory/practice divide, she posits that we should instead encourage tutors to swap stories with an eye toward “interpreting, complicating, and rewriting” those stories. Such a swapping of stories seems to allow tutors to discuss the contradictions in dogma, to discuss real-life situations, and to exercise their authority and expertise among peers.

Research re-creating the researcher: Methodology & Terminology

Initially, my proposed research focused on the training of writing center tutors in Miami University’s course ENG 481 (Writing Center Consulting), particularly the role of feedback in tutors’ development and growth throughout their semester of training and beyond. I planned to utilize a modified form of grounded theory, in which I entered my research with only a general focus—feedback—and hoped from there to narrow down specific codes and theorize around my findings. Further, I hoped to identify what kinds of feedback are most useful, when and why—that is, how these types of feedback encouraged or challenged students to move beyond their primary role as mere students and into their newfound role as writing center tutors. I had four volunteer tutors-in-training from ENG 481, and my research project involved not only the collection of their relevant course materials (such as reflection essays and tutoring session analysis papers included in end-of-the-semester portfolios), but also a series of supplemental interviews designed to further examine the role feedback—from instructors, peers, and the writers they work with in the writing center—had in each tutor’s growth and training. As I began to interview the tutors-in-training, however, it became clear that they did not have much to say on the matter. My interviews began to reveal that, much like myself, these tutors had a lot to say about the ways in which their identities as both students and tutors—and sorority members and club presidents and siblings, to name a few—affect their professional motivations and aspirations, how they perceived themselves in the university at large, and how they did—or did not—claim and construct their own place in the writing center community.

Based on their own interest in these matters, I became curious as to what more experienced consultants might have to say on the matter, as well. Because of my position in the writing center as a graduate assistant—in charge of helping to manage the current tutors whose
opinion I wanted—I designed an anonymous online survey so that these tutors would not feel pressured to participate or to answer how they thought I wanted them to. Five of the experienced tutors provided answers to this survey, which I used to help supplement the interview material provided by the four tutors in training.

To ensure anonymity for the new tutors, each will be assigned a pseudonym, and I have made every attempt to avoid supplying unnecessary identifying information, given the relatively small size of their training course. Given that the online survey was entirely anonymous, I will refer to these participants as “Tutor A,” “Tutor B,” and so on.

In addition to the tutors’ own voices and experiences, I begin each section of my thesis, as I have above, with a brief resituating of myself within the writing center world and within my own present project. These scenarios have larger implications for the theorizing and interrogation of practice I’m trying to do. These moments are intended to be of the realm of writing center lore, the kind of stories swapped between shifts or shared on WCenter that both bring writing center folk together and inspire us to continually improve, to bring about change.

On the most practical level, these pockets of narrative offer spaces in which I can simply work through and make sense of the various experience my fellow tutors and I have had—and perhaps connect them to experiences other writing center folks have, too. This seems in line with feminist knowledge-making practices and with most scholarship in the field of writing center stories, most recently Denny’s *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Tutoring*, mentioned above, which value narratives for their potential for, among other things, fostering community and validating the day-to-day experiences we have.

Beyond giving me an interesting angle from which to approach or demonstrate the various complexities that I hope to explore, incorporating narrative can, as Lynn Briggs and Meg Woolbright write in *Stories from the Center: Connecting Narrative and Theory in the Writing Center*, “mak[e] academic theory accessible, perhaps acceptable, and more authoritative.” Similarly, as Cathy Fleischer writes in her *Composing Teacher-Research: A Prosaic History*, “[a] feminist research paradigm depends upon a grounding of inquiry in concrete experience and actual language, in the lived lives of women, rather than in preconceived, abstract categories.” Following these scholars’ assertions, then, my own inclusion of situations and stories is meant to make the complications I explore more understandable and relevant to my audience—not merely
writing center administrators and sympathizers, but writing center tutors themselves, for they, too, are living these complexities even now.

Finally, a note on terminology: I have decided to use “tutor” to refer to writing center student staff to remain consistent with the bulk of writing center work, though I recognize the potentially hierarchy-supporting connotations such a title can have. Only when I am quoting directly from literature or the tutors themselves will I use other terminology (as “consultant” is what our tutors are called at Miami University’s writing center, and the term they are most familiar with).

The following chapters will, then, attempt to show the complicated ways in which tutors understand and construct their identities in much the same way that Grimm, Denny, and Britzman, above, have shown that student-writers and student-teachers undergo similar transformations, in part of their own choosing and in part coerced. I hope to show, like Kail and Vandenberg, the ways in which writing center literature and training texts attempt to construct tutors in specific ways that do not always match with how the tutors themselves describe their roles, positions, or ever-tenuous grasps on authority. Further, I want to argue that “our” writing center communities, too, need interrogation—particularly the ways in which we may be suppressing diversity by reductively emphasizing community similarities rather than embracing differences, as well as the ways in which we may be marginalizing tutors who do not quite fit the prescribed identities set out for them in writing center literature and training texts. Ultimately, I hope to offer suggestions based both in my informants’ experiences and in my own so that our treatment and training of tutors may be enriched in a way that both invites and celebrates their own (and our communities) multiple and ever-changing identities.
Chapter 2:
Complicating Tutors’ Identities

(Re)Situating Myself

As an active member of the writing center community, I’ve recently found myself interested in the ways that we train tutors to begin the truly difficult work asked of them once they step inside of the writing center. Faced with my own identity struggles as I tried to reconcile my multiple identities as a graduate student and teacher and writing center tutor—and then, finally, as an Assistant Director of a writing center—I wondered in what ways tutors may feel themselves conflicted as they not only situate themselves within the university, but as they begin to resituate and identify with the writing center specifically. I thus designed a person-based study, as discussed in Chapter 1, in which I would try to identify how the different kinds of feedback tutors-in-training were receiving was affecting their development as tutors. This seemed important, at the outset, to understand what kinds of feedback were especially identity shaping—was it feedback from their professor, their bosses, their peers, the writers with whom they worked? Each kind of feedback received, I imagined, would have a different place in each trainee’s development.

But as I came to the interview phase of my project—interviewing four tutors-in-training as they began ENG 481: Writing Center Consulting, again at the middle of the semester, and once more as they began their employment at Miami University’s Howe Center for Writing Excellence—something unexpected and exciting emerged. Though I had intended to get an understanding of how feedback provided to the tutors-in-training helped them develop across the semester, it seemed that they had little to say on the subject—feedback was great and very helpful, of course, but not something they felt compelled to discuss, particularly with a graduate assistant in the very place they were training to work. What was worth discussing, however, emerged when they voiced their own ever-conflicted identities as they tried to understand themselves as students and as tutors, as friends and as professionals, as individuals and as new members of the writing center community.

This should not have been surprising, as I too had recently begun to identify my own complex and conflicted writing center and university identities, as discussed in Chapter 1—yet, as I searched in writing center literature to find what others were saying about the important
issue of tutor identities, I found the field surprisingly, disappointingly quiet, and I realized that my interviewees could help fill that void.

Thus, my inquiry shifted from a focus on feedback to identifying and theorizing the “identity issues,” as Will so aptly put it, of my four interviewees. In this chapter, I explore the complex identities each negotiates. All four are majoring in the College of Arts and Sciences, have various connections to the university outside of academics and employment (such as extra-curricular clubs and Greek organizations), entered ENG 481: Writing Center Consulting in the Fall 2010, and were subsequently employed by the Howe Center for Writing Excellence in Spring 2011. I first explore some of the identity constructions present (and, in some cases, absent) from popular writing center texts. I then take a close look at two of my interviewees’ particular struggles to identify with the writing center, starting with their initial statements on why they decided to become writing center tutors and what they felt the role of the writing center tutor was from our initial interviews, in hopes of comparing their descriptions of identity to those set forth by the popular texts discussed earlier.

**Writing Center Texts & The Myth of a Universal Tutor Identity**

Writing center texts—particularly training texts—cast tutors in certain roles, calling them to identify and perform in often conflicted ways. Writing center lore is filled with tales of marginality and oppression, of exclusion and subjugation; as alluded to in my opening narrative of Chapter 1, it’s easy for tutors—and even administrators—to slip into the us vs. them construct, precluding the possibilities of partnership with and acknowledgement of similar values or ideals within the university as a whole. Beginning, perhaps, with the defensive mentality demonstrated in Stephen North’s oft-anthologized essay, “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984), which seeks to dispel common myths about what the writing center is or does (like the writing center as “fix-it shop”), many early writing center scholars and practitioners seem to demarcate very clearly the realm of the classroom—the them—from the realm of the writing center—the us. As North states unequivocally, “We are not here to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum. We are here to talk to writers” (52). Though North ultimately calls for cooperation between teachers and tutors, his “declaration of independence,” as he terms it, certainly perpetuates—if not constructs—the boundary between

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3 The names of my interviewees—in this chapter, Will and Alicia, and in Chapter 3, Emma and Jen—are pseudonyms either selected by the interviewee or assigned afterwards by me.
the writing center and the rest of the university. It begins, perhaps, the common writing center theme of the center—and by extension, its administrators and, more crucially for my present work, its tutors—as a university underdog-turned-hero.

As mentioned earlier, Harvey Kail, in “Separation, Initiation, and Return: Tutor Training Manuals and Writing Center Lore” (2003), called attention to the way the first wave of tutor training texts suggest a linear path of development for writing center tutors by constructing a narrative in which the tutor is largely cast as a hero. The stages of this constructed narrative feature the “alienation and reunion” of the student and his teacher, followed by the “social and cultural transformation” of the tutor (and later the student, through the tutor’s careful guidance), and finally the “marginalization and eventual validation” of the tutor’s role (94). In other words, the tutor comes into the student’s life when he is most alienated, most in need of help—and the tutor is, in turn, transformed by the experience as well, rising to the challenge and overcoming her marginalized position in the university and becoming validated for the help she has provided the student.

His research into this writing center training narrative, Kail writes, “suggests that we deeply identify ourselves with the themes of these tutor training initiation stories” and calls to mind “the history of our own collective ‘heroic’ struggle to establish writing centers in universities and colleges” (94). That is, the narrative constructed by tutor training manuals—as well as much writing center lore—sets tutors-in-training up to attempt to fill a hero role themselves. Together, North’s and Kail’s work, among others, set the stage for writing centers—and again, their tutors particularly—to be at once separate from and a hero for the university at large. The tutor-as-hero—hereafter to be referred to simply as the Hero role—emphasizes the necessity not of “fixing” students’ work for them, but rather intervening in students’ writing processes and “helping” them to see better ways of creating, thinking, and being in the university—saving them, in effect, from the errors of their former ways, as well as the wicked institution around them. At the same time that it separates the tutors out from the university, it seems to create the Hero role. However, this line of thought also begins to set up a unified, normative identity. What is the Hero supposed to know? How is the tutor supposed to identify? With whom are her allegiances supposed to lie?

Some of these questions are taken up by Steven Bailey in “Tutor Handbooks: Heuristic Texts for Negotiating Difference in a Globalized World” (2012). Bailey discusses the limitations
and particular identity called for in more recent “Generation 2.0” writing center training texts—such as Gillespie and Lerner’s *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, currently used in the training course my interviewees were a part of. Despite coming a long way since the original “Generation 1.0” training texts (some of which is discussed by Kail, above) in the early days of writing center history, Bailey contends, these newer training texts still “fail to make room for tutors from alternative cultural and linguistic backgrounds” by assuming “that tutors are [North American] cultural insiders and native speakers” (3). Ultimately, Bailey asserts, training texts imply the above identity is “the only possible identity for tutors to hold,” which runs the risk not only of excluding a diverse array of students from pursuing jobs as writing center tutors, but also of silencing any existing tutors (or tutors-in training) who may have diverse backgrounds. The collective identity expected of tutors becomes, then, a vision of normativity in the university—tutors are assumed to be entirely able and devoid of the trappings of race, gender, and class.

And though some writing center training texts encourage “thinking about what you already know and then building upon that knowledge,” as well as “examining expectations” (Gillespie and Lerner, 1 and 47), it’s clear that these calls are not meant to be applied to tutors’ own non-academic lived experiences. Writing center tutors are not encouraged to examine their own biographies and the subjectivities that come with them—perhaps because of this kind of suppression of non-normative identities. A lack of room is made available for tutors who are non-native speakers of English, or who may be easily identified as members of racial minorities or the LGBTQ community; they are placed in a position below the high expectations of the Hero. Bailey writes, “In most cases… multilingual tutors from diverse backgrounds are entirely absent from Generation 2.0 handbooks. This absence is facilitated by a false binary between two opposing identities—monolingual Euro-American tutor and multilingual international client. As a result, tutors holding alternative cultural and linguistic identities are simply erased” (4). To this quote, I would add that not only multilingual tutors but also all tutors with embodied difference are excluded. Important, again, is Bailey’s reminder of the barrier established separating tutors—who are supposed to be the most exemplary examples of the normative university population—and the rest of the university, particularly those who seek help from the writing center. When a tutor does not neatly fit into the pre-established tutor identity, the logic could too easily follow—she simply does not belong working in the writing center.

While Bailey calls attention to the complicated issue of linguistically and culturally
diverse tutors—for whom their own authority as tutors is not merely granted based upon their position in the center, but questioned based upon, at times, how “foreign” they look, as two of his tutors poignantly discuss—there are, remarkably, no current articles or texts at the time of my writing that address tutors with either learning or physical disabilities. Though, as Julie Neff writes in “Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center” (1994), “learning-disabled students who come to college [often] score in the above-average range of standard IQ tests and have finely honed skills for compensating for and adapting to their particular disability [sic],” there is no room allowed in current literature and training texts for such capable students to become writing center tutors (378); they are, instead, those in need of the Hero’s helping hand—the subject of “What If…” sections of training texts, rather than those reading along. The case is the same for the physically disabled; though they, too, are often dedicated students with valuable perspectives to offer, physically disabled students are cast only as those in need of help—perhaps discounted as Bailey’s apparently obviously culturally non-normative tutors were, above.

Rather than a lack of representative diversity, perhaps tutors fear coming out as diverse, or fear questioning or revealing details and experiences that might make them appear non-normative. As Grimm discusses in Good Intentions: “Our intensely individualistic culture compels us to deny the mutual interdependence between the individual and the social, the ways we constitute one another intersubjectively and relationally,” creating a “cultural denial” that is difficult to work out of. This, too, is discussed by Deborah Britzman in Practice Makes Practice, thanks to, as she terms it, the myth of “the rugged individual,” for whom “any context—be it history, race, class, gender, or physicality—is positioned as if it were a mere handicap to be individually overcome.” Britzman explains how this myth creates for student-teachers a construction of a normative identity—encouraging them to leave behind any trappings of difference—that is, I argue, similar to the demands for a normative identity found in the writing center literature discussed above. She writes:

The suppression of social categories we all embody has particular sources in the field of teaching. […] Teachers are supposed to ‘shed’ their own social casings and personal preferences in order to uphold the discourse of objectivity that beckons individuals as if they could leave behind the social meanings they already embody. This particular brand of ‘fairness’ requires teachers to deny the
Thus, as Grimm and Britzman illustrate, the push for members of academia—teachers and tutors especially—to be independent individuals devoid of context creates a lack of attention to its members’ own lived experiences, social categories, and subjectivities.

This, I argue, helps perpetuate the binaries created by the monolithic insider identity mentioned above—it creates an “in” group (the normative tutors) and an “out” group (student-writers, especially of diverse backgrounds, and perhaps even non-normative tutors). But while Britzman explains this suppression as linked to calls for “fairness” and the myth of “the rugged individual,” I believe there may be more at stake for such moves in the writing center world, which has long faced misunderstanding and suspicion from the university at large (hence North’s defensive attitude, above). As Grimm also writes, “…because writing centers are funded for modernist reasons (to improve the correctness of student writing), writing center workers too often must avoid questioning taken-for-granted university assumptions,” such as Britzman’s myth of the rugged individual (2).

Thus, though writing centers are in an opportune position to encourage students to explore their own identities and find ways to make their lived experiences relevant to the world of academia, it is difficult, if not dangerous, for them to do so—and even more risky, perhaps, for them to encourage their tutors to do so. If tutors are supposed to be the university’s finest examples of normative identity—separated from the rest of the university not by their difference, but by their excellence—asking them to interrogate their own social identities, to locate the ways in which they have been helped and hindered by their own ability, race, class, gender, and sexuality, may risk turning them against the very institution that has gotten them to where they presently are.

It is easier, perhaps, to emphasize tutors’ similarities with the students with whom they work and their common cause with academia, rather than to encourage tutors’ interrogation of personal histories and risk their resistance. Perhaps to mitigate the potential for resistance—either on behalf of the tutors or on behalf of the university that funds writing centers—writing center literature adopts what Carino terms a “rhetoric of peer-ness,” as discussed earlier. This rhetoric emphasizes over and over that tutors are only peers, and thus, the argument goes, largely immune to the identity politics and power relations of the university at large. This, too, may be a
factor in the lack of tutor interrogation into their own identities. In addition to a rhetoric of “peer
ness,” and perhaps in conflict with it and with the tutor as the Hero, is the rhetoric of the tutor as
a professional. This is emphasized, for example, in Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli’s The
Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors and Margaret Soven’s What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know,
both of which call especially for “professional” behavior towards faculty, though tutors may feel
more easily allied with student-writers. As Soven writes (to tutors and tutors-in-training):

Although you may feel that adhering to these [professional]
guidelines may at times make you feel less like a peer, keep in
mind that you are playing several roles. At times they may seem at
odds with one another. As a peer, you talk with your friends about
your teachers. But once you put on your tutoring hat, you must also
consider your relationship with the faculty, which if poor can
undermine the peer-tutoring program. (27, emphasis added)

The discussion of professionalism for Soven stops there, and it is assumed that the would-be
tutor reading her text agrees and is happy to become the Professional, ignoring the potential for
conflicts to arise when, perhaps, a non-normative tutor (or student) has not had privileged
relationships with faculty in her academic career, and may have a much different perspective on
the matter of academic discourse than the normative audience Soven is likely envisioning as
reading her text—or if said tutor is actively trying to fulfill the Hero role discussed above.

The professional advice provided to tutors-in-training—that they should never question a
teacher’s grades or negatively discuss her assignments, for example—are practices generally
agreed upon by most writing centers because, as Margaret J. Marshall explains in “Sites for
(Invisible) Intellectual Work” (2001), the current university system perceives writing centers as
sites for service for the greater university, rather than sites for the intellectual work “involving
literacy, discourse practices, teacher education, and institutional policy, to name but a few of the
possibilities” already undertaken at writing centers (75). If writing centers’ perceived value by
those who foot the bills and make the faculty appointments necessary for the writing center to
remain open is merely to support—and not question—classroom practices, it would surely be
wise for tutors (and other members of the writing center staff) to heed Soven’s advice and
embrace the role of the Professional.

Though this Professional, largely detached role seems wise and well accepted in these
types of situations, the language used to describe this professionalization seems revealing in that it, again, does not invite personal histories or subjectivities, but rather assumes a unified tutor identity (as does the Hero role). At the same time, it both validates the work of tutors—being called professional is an acknowledgement of their skills and importance, and perhaps belies how little institutional power they truly have. The rhetoric of the professional invites them to step outside of their “peer” identity, breaking the rhetoric of peer-ness explored by Carino by tacitly asking tutors to identify with faculty, rather than their peers. It is a stunning moment of interpellation of the tutor; as Grimm explains, the university as a whole and the training texts themselves provide the “discursively constructed subject position” of “the responsible”—or, perhaps, professional—“writing center tutor,” who is then rewarded for taking such a position (70).

This type of professionalization and alliance with teachers’ perspectives—which, again, may be necessary to the survival of writing centers in precarious institutional positions—together with the suppression of tutors’ social categories may be at the heart of why Grimm and others have criticized writing centers for “assuming a ‘regulatory role’ […] by managing difference and acting as an enforcement mechanism for the status quo” (Gillespie and Lerner 21). It is, perhaps, for this reason that a tension exists between much writing center scholarship and theory and its training texts and praxis; many top-name scholars like Grimm and Denny call for tutors to engage student-writers in discussions of diverse lived experiences in hopes of shaking up overly modern academic institutions—a return, in many ways, to the Hero role. As Denny writes, the writing tutor becomes for students a “middle person… [who] helps students navigate an academic terrain that can be uninviting and exclusionary. Discovering well-worn paths and learning new routes to self-understanding and awareness of the world is a hallmark of intellectual of life, and tutors model and facilitate this complicated and intensely personal work” (121-122).

Denny’s call places tutors, I think, in a strange limbo of sorts; they are, on one hand, Heroes, guiding lost students through the academic jungle—yet they are also oddly detached Professionals in the “middle,” there to help students through, but not necessarily encouraged to

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4 Earlier in his article, Denny interestingly positions writing center directors particularly in the roll of missionaries—another version of Heroism, perhaps. He writes: “Writing center directors and staff must find strategic occasions to evangelize and give testimonials of what we do, not just to build the faith among the unconverted, but to destabilize conventional wisdom of what we do and who we are” (115, emphasis added).
explore their own “self-understanding and awareness of the world.” This quote, perhaps more than any other, brings to the forefront the complicated, conflicted roles the tutor is called to perform—be selflessly heroic in secret, appropriately professional in public, and always, of course, a normative peer. This may also be the crux of the powerful conflicts of identity that tutors face as they undergo their training and step into the role of the writing center tutor. Writing center literature and training texts position tutors-in-training to perform in particular ways—such as the Hero and the Professional—while also discouraging exploration of personal biographies and subjectivities by presenting only one, normative tutor identity. Indeed, my interviews with writing center tutors-in-training revealed their alignment with these preferred rhetorics and the complicated, conflicted roles they generate.

“I'm this new person”: Will's Conflicts

Will, my only male interviewee, was a junior at the time of our interviews. He is, like the other interviewees, majoring in the College of Arts and Sciences; he is also the president of an on-campus club and is a “liaison” for the Dean of the College and Arts and Sciences. He was, like many writing center tutors (including another of my interviewees), encouraged to become a tutor by one of his professors—though he had other, more “heroic” intentions, as well, as will be discussed below. Will provided compelling interviews throughout the course of his training and as he began working in the writing center. He seemed eager throughout our interviews to perform the Hero role expected of him and perhaps validate his role in the center, though the competing pull of the Professional role and his other ties to the university caused him to experience some conflicts over his evolving identity.

Will had only visited the writing center once before training, to receive some help with his application materials for the writing center job. He admits to initially thinking that a writing center tutor would be “an editor,” though after “reading lots of theories and what the ideal consultant is” in ENG 481, he has “gather[ed] it's all about drawing out the student's ideas and it's not working on the text. It's working to create better writers.” This new understanding echoes North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center,” particularly North’s now-ubiquitous axiom: “Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (438). Much else in Will’s interview also harks back to this article, as well. For example, explaining his motivation to become a writing tutor, he sees tutoring as a means for him to help a large group of others:
It's all about improving my own skills. I have many friends and family that have relied on me in the past for fixing their papers or helping them come up with new ideas, whether for school or for play, so, […] before it [was] all about me trying to help others that're close to me, but now there's a chance to help the school at large.\footnote{Since I recorded and subsequently transcribed each interview, all italics in interviewees’ quotes are my own added emphasis.}

He has been trusted in the past to help “fix” friends’ papers, but now he is ready to stop such anti-writing center behaviors and take on the heroic task of “helping the school at large”—mirroring some of the language from popular writing center readings that he had been exposed to at the time of our interview, including North’s “The Idea of a Writing Center,” discussed earlier.

Though the above quotes come from an interview that took place after only two full weeks of ENG 481, Will seems already eager to demonstrate his change in perspective and new understandings of the role he will have as a writing center tutor—to separate himself from his old identity, to borrow Kail’s language, and begin initiating himself into a new one, thereby validating his own role and skills as not merely an individual student but now, as a tutor (and a hero). Will’s moves toward separating with the past also extend to separating himself from peers, supporting Kail’s assertion that “peer tutors emphatically do separate from the mass of other students on campus” (76). When asked during our first interview, for example, about how feedback from peers had or had not benefited him in the past\footnote{This question was a hold over from when I originally intended to find out about feedback’s role for trainees. Though the focus didn’t pan out, Will’s answer is still illuminating.}, Will explained:

…it seems like most students don’t know what peer reviewing is. […] I remember before when I peer-reviewed, it was really hair pulling for me because I already realized there had to be a dialogue between writer and person reviewing.

This statement seems to construct his past self as destined (to continue the Hero motif) for writing center work—though he had yet to visit the writing center or enter ENG 481, he was already poised to “help” other students who, unlike him, had yet to realize the importance of “dialogue,” the cornerstone of writing center practice. He has already, in other words, envisioned
himself apart from his peers in a manner consistent with the way training texts, as described earlier, seem to set tutors off from their peers, as well.

However, Will also seems eager, at times, to separate himself from fellow trainees. In our second interview, for example, he asserts that now that he has begun tutoring in the writing center, he hasn’t had “any disaster stories as most students have.” When asked about the observations that he had completed, as well, he is quick to point out his own exemplary performance before actually discussing any specific observations:

...I’m a *special case* because I kept going and I kept observing.

[…] Other *students*, they only went the same time every week, so they only saw certain consultants all the time, observe them certain times. I was seeing different consultants every day, and I was able to observe at Peabody, you know I was trying to observe not just ELL students, but regular students, maybe a thesis, […] so *I feel like I had the most holistic idea towards what consultations were.*

I’d also observe the welcome desk if there were no consultations, getting every aspect.

Here, too, it’s easy to see Will separating himself from other trainees, who have, presumably, only observed the required amount of times—he is a “special case” because he put in much more time than other trainees, allowing him to see “every aspect” of the writing center, even aspects that were, perhaps, unnecessary so early on in his training. Will is clearly proud of his accomplishment, because now he has “the most holistic idea” about the writing center—again distinguishing himself from his fellow trainees.

The performative work of setting himself apart from both fellow students and fellow trainees may be a consequence of the Hero mentality—the heroes of the writing center have, after all, “emphatically… separate[d] from the mass of other students on campus,” to quote Kail once more, and are used to being affirmed in their skills by professors and friends alike (76). Yet, it seems that something else could be at work besides Will’s desire to take on the Hero role described above. His moves to separate from other students and trainees may be not just to

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7 All trainees are required to work two hours a week in the writing center, starting mid-semester, to supplement their readings with experience.

8 Peabody refers to a satellite location of the Howe Center for Writing Excellence on Western Campus.
identify with and create a role for himself in the writing center community, but perhaps also an attempt at taking on the Professional role described earlier. That is, Will may be, intentionally or not, trying to ally himself with academic discourse rather than the writing center—which is, as discussed above, often cast as marginally situated within or even working against, academic discourse. A similar move is made by the students (particularly graduate students) discussed in LeCourt’s *Identity Matters*. As LeCourt argues, “…academic discourse is sought after as a route to power. Its technology of power is supported both by its connections to other discourses and its claim to certain valued ways of knowing in our society. The students, thus, seek out such validation and the benefits it can accord…” (76). She further notes that in the pursuit of academic discourse, “the approval of authorities… outweighs any social deficit among peers” (81)—authorities, in this case, being the interviewer (me) and peers being the fellow students from whom he was distancing himself.

However, it is not easy to be both a selfless Hero and identify with academic discourse. Though Will enjoyed working with students (particularly English Language Learner, or ELL, students)—as he explained, “I feel like it's fun, I feel I'm helpful”—he also explained during our second interview a situation in which he felt his roles conflict. While explaining that he was “not so individualized now,” Will went on to tell the following story, which illustrates a conflict between his desire to play the Hero—“helping” students by standing up on their behalf, even when it may be disadvantageous to himself—and the Professional—siding with academic discourse and staying the course:

I was at a luncheon with one of the professors from Political Science, and she was describing to me how [...] she grades people off of grammar. After the fifth grammar mistake, she stops reading and grades from there. And I said, “Uh, that's not good.” [...] But ah, [...] without the training, maybe I wouldn't call the professor out on that [...] Well, you don’t really want to get face-to-face with the professor, so I just gave her examples, like what about the English language learners, do they get the same [grading on grammar]? She mumbles, ‘Eh, you know how it is,’ and I’m like, ‘No!’

9 Grimm in particular calls for the writing center—and its tutors—to
But, ah, no, I mean I could have [talked to her more about it], but she’s the one who’s, she’s the head of the one place that actually provides [my club] money, so, you know, not only am I a writing consultant, I also have other motives as the president of [this club], you know. I want funding, but ah, I don’t know. Identity issues, those are always fun.

While Will was unafraid to discuss with the professor the ramifications of her grading policy—due in part, he says later in our interview, to his writing center training—he is forced to drop the issue because the professor in question is in charge of determining whether or not his club continues to receive funding. His role as the Hero compels him to stand up for students with whom he works in the writing center, to defend them in academic discourse—yet his role as the Professional alternatively compels him to be mindful of his position in the university and the necessity of a beneficial relationship with this faculty member in particular. It seems as though his training in particular has validated and emboldened him—but that this may have caused him to temporarily forget the unwavering correctness of academic discourse—which has, LeCourt reminds us, “material benefits” for its rule-abiding members (76).

Thus, Will’s conflicts show how the contradictory identities set up in writing center texts can leave writing center trainees facing conflicts: do they want to be Heroes, fighting for student writers more than the correctness of academic discourse, or do they want to be Professionals, upholding academic discourse and aligning themselves with professors? Because tutors’ own identities are not the subject of scholarship in the way that students’ identities are—despite the fact that tutors are, in fact, still students themselves—they are left largely unsupported as they try to navigate and even create paths for themselves within the university. For Will, the struggle had tangible, material stakes—if he chose to fully identify with the role of the Hero, he would risk losing Professional face, not to mention funding for his extra-curricular club.

But because Will has never been encouraged to examine his own biography, there are also aspects of his “social context” that may still go unrecognized—for instance, how his gender and socioeconomic class may have furthered (or hindered) him in academic discourse, among other considerations that were never discussed in the course of our interviews. His position in

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Will later added, “But ah, the writing consultant, without the training, maybe I wouldn't call the professor out on that.”
academic discourse is, after all, a privileged one—the multiple positions he occupies (student, tutor, president of a club, liaison to the dean) have not been achieved without effort and, perhaps, playing particular roles and identifying in certain ways. Yet, while his biography has certainly played a role in getting him to those positions, Will either is unwilling or unable to acknowledge such, lacking, perhaps, an “awareness of the ways that [he has] internalized social norms” (Grimm 72).

“I can’t get a C, I’m a writing consultant?”: Alicia’s Journey

Will is not alone in his suppression of his own biography, as Alicia’s interview illustrates. Yet, unlike Will, Alicia’s series of interviews did not contain much heroism—rather, her own struggle seemed to be primarily to take on the role of the Professional, especially as she tries to reconcile being a professional and being a peer or even friend. Alicia was also a junior at the time of our interviews; she was also the only interviewee to have frequented the writing center before applying for the job and beginning the training course. She was encouraged to work at the writing center by a professor earlier in her college career, but was hesitant to apply until a friend who worked at the writing center urged her to finally do so. She is a member of a Greek organization and of the university’s Panhellenic Association and considers herself to be, a “professional person, because,” she explained in our final interview, “I feel that I carry myself like that on a daily basis.”

In our initial interview, she described an initial motivation that was at once similar to and different from Will’s. She explained:

*Initially I just wanted to get involved with something,* like a club or organization that had to do with writing, because I wasn't sure what I wanted to major in as far as writing or English, and *I have a good friend who is a writing consultant,* he started a couple of years ago, and he was like "Yeah, yeah, you should try it, you're really good at writing," and I felt like I was already helping my friends out by editing their papers or guiding them and stuff like that, so I was just really interested in seeing if there was a way to get people interested in writing, not necessarily to fix papers but to get them excited about writing their papers. *So, just kind of to help my friends out.*
Like Will, Alicia seems to be allying herself with North and pushing against the desire merely to “fix” papers, which she has admittedly done in the past. She also asserts that she would like to “help” others, particularly her own friends. Friends seem to be an important motivating factor for Alicia, particularly because she, unlike the other interviewees, had a “close friend” encourage her to apply for the job—a close friend who also reaffirmed her skills in writing, which seem to be a recurring source of both confidence and anxiety for Alicia.

I mention her concern with communication skills because Alicia seems particularly to emphasize her own writing, perhaps more than any other interviewees. In our first interview, as well, when asked about how feedback from her professors has or has not helped her in the past, she brings up a particular class for which she first used the writing center. She explained:

I had a course my freshman year where the teacher really encouraged students to go to the writing center, and I think I had written my first paper in that class. I did well on it, I mean I got like a high B on it, and I was fine with it, but then [my teacher] was like, “I encourage everyone to go [to the writing center],” so I went for the following paper, and then I got a higher grade on it, I got an A on it. [...] It was actually that professor that encouraged me to seek a position at the writing center because she thought that even without the guidance, you know, my first paper, I did well on as a freshman, and it was in a higher-level class. So I feel like professor feedback is really important in that case, it really stuck with me and encouraged me to pursue not only the job, but it changed my major.

Here, Alicia seems, like many students, to perceive good writing skills as essential to a position as a writing center tutor—as Gillespie and Lerner write somewhat unequivocally in the opening of their second chapter of The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring, “You’re considering becoming a writing tutor or are already tutoring because you’ve had some success as a writer yourself” (11). Like the monolithic construction of the tutor as an exemplar of normativity, there is simply no other option—if you are not “good” at writing, you cannot be a writing center tutor.

While this is troubling for many reasons—including that it continues the normative identity described above, thus having the potential to exclude writers who may have excellent
writing processes, but non-normative writing products—it is also troubling in that Alicia’s association with the writing center as a place where people with good grades work causes her distress later on. In our second interview, Alicia explained that she had recently gotten a C grade—typically a “fair” or “satisfactory” grade—on a paper, which was difficult for her to reconcile with her new role as a consultant:

I’ve always considered myself a really good writer, which is why I picked an English major, […] and I always do pretty well on papers of any sort, but I’m in a class now and I got a C on a paper, and I was just mind-blown. This is probably going to sound so bad, but I was like, “I got a C on a paper and I’m a writing consultant!” […] *I felt like, but I’m a writing consultant, I can’t get a C*.

That would just be horrible, you know?

Again, Alicia reiterates that she is a “really good writer”—and also explains later that the poor grade was simply due to a misunderstanding of the prompt—because for her, a writing consultant *must* be, without exception, a good writer. To get an insufficient grade is “horrible,” because it has the potential to invalidate her burgeoning professional identity in the university—someone in whom friends and strangers alike can put their trust.

This grade incident aside, however, Alicia largely does consider herself, she explains, “a professional person,” both in and out of the writing center. Professionalism, for Alicia, seems to match up with the way she presents herself, as well as the authority she gains from having experiences across campus, which leads people to seek out and trust her opinion:

I feel that I carry myself like that on a daily basis. And I think that that comes from a lot of different things, like I’m involved in a lot of other leadership responsibilities and I will say that there have been instances where people, er, people might not trust my judgment just being I’m a student or I’m a girl or whatever else, but at the same time, there are people who look at my background and my credentials and not just having been trained at the writing center, but having the leadership positions I have in other areas and stuff, and they come to me for advice and help.
Here, Alicia emphasizes her connections and especially leadership across the university—perhaps because these experiences have allowed her to have a broad perspective on university comings and goings across campus—as well as the fact that people come to her “for advice and help.” Like Will’s emphasis of his own credentials and experiences, this, too, could be a nod toward the heroism and myth of individuality present in writing center training literature—they are trusted advisors, for friends and deans and strangers alike.

Yet, unlike Will, Alicia mentions, however briefly, that there are reasons why people might doubt her authority and her professional identity—because she is “a student or …a girl or whatever else.” Her rush to skip over these identities—particularly as a “girl” and what may be hidden by “whatever else,” such as race or socioeconomic class—seems particularly reaffirming of the problem of the normative construction of tutor identities set forth by writing center literature and training texts, whose rhetorics simply do not invite interrogating such social contexts. Yet these conflicts seem to be bubbling just below the surface—making themselves known, however briefly, in Alicia’s quick mention thereof—calling to be released and examined in the open.

Conclusion

I began by discussing how writing center literature and training texts present tutor identities—as Heroes and Professionals, and importantly, as normative—and the dangers that come with such presentations, such as a lack of space for non-normative identities and interrogation of the identities that tutors bring with them and continue to embody as they enter the writing center. I then discussed the ways in which Will and Alicia picked up on these identities in writing center discourse and began to try to shape themselves to fit the categories of Hero or Professional, and how this caused them conflicts as they progressed in their training and their involvement with the writing center.

I do not, however, mean to cast any of my interviewees as solely constructed by the writing center discourse surrounding them; while they have been shaped by the identity categories provided to—and hidden from—them, both Will and Alicia also brought their own unique perspectives to their training and work. Will, for example, showed considerable growth throughout the course of our interviews, ultimately coming to see himself not as an infallible hero, but rather as “this new person” after writing center training. In addition to coming to acknowledge the multiple roles he occupied within the university as he did above, Will also
became reflective of the “grey areas” he faced when consulting particularly with international students, explaining:

I guess with international students, I don’t know how far I should push their writing into a more native ear. So of course I ask the question, ‘Are you okay with this sounding native?’ and of course they say yes, so… It just helps me, but I know I’m forcing their yes out of their mouths, but… that, that is the grey area.

As a language-learner himself, as well, Will often calls his attention to their needs—eventually coming to be quite reflective of his potentially regulatory role, as above.

And though Alicia did not ultimately express as detailed a concern with such issues during our interviews, she interestingly experienced her own kind of growth as she went through the course and ultimately became a writing center tutor. Though she initially expressed doubts about her abilities to help others in the writing center—perhaps due to the personal identities as a student, girl, or “whatever else,” mentioned above—she came to be quite empowered by her role as a writing center tutor—and perhaps by the role of the Professional, as well. As she wrote in her final reflection for her ENG 481 portfolio, she began her involvement with the writing center with a fair amount of anxiety about her own abilities:

At the start of the year I remember feeling very shy and reserved, unsure what my contribution to the writing center consulting class would be, or how well I would do in the actual consulting position once officially hired. Some of my reservations included personal lack of confidence in certain areas, specifically, my ability to communicate with people without being overbearing or unengaged. While others revolved around the concern of my capacity to learn the necessities from the class that I would need in order to be the best that I could.

Yet, by our final interview, Alicia was largely confident in her role as a writing center tutor, explaining that her “permanent doubts have fleeted” and that her only sources of anxiety now were much more localized, such as working with a writer on a very complicated text (like a “dissertation”) or a text in a subject that she was unfamiliar with. Taking on the role of the
writing center tutor—and, perhaps, the Professional, as well—helped Alicia find a place for herself within academic discourse, and to feel confident in her own skills.

Missing, however, from my above discussion is the role that community may play in tutors’ identity-development. In the following chapter, I will take a look at the way the normative construction of tutor identities is connected to a monolithic construction of writing center community. I will also look at additional interviewees’ experiences, as well as the experiences reported by experienced writing center tutors via an anonymous online survey, in order to try complicate the ways we typically understand the community and space of the writing center—and the identities of the tutors supposedly included therein.
Chapter 3: 
Tutors’ Identities and “Our” Writing Center Communities

Situating My Community

I have, at the time of my writing, been a member of two local writing center communities—broadly stated—for over four years. I’ve worked in two very different writing centers on two very different campuses—one a modest basement room barely designated by a sign in urban Baltimore, the other a well-positioned and open space in the middle of the university library in rural Ohio. Though similar in their North-ian missions to make “better writers, not better writing” and thus a part of the global writing center community so often invoked by emails on the WCenter listserv, presentations at International Writing Center Association (IWCA) conferences, and articles throughout Writing Center Journal, each of these writing centers has its own unique, local identity. Much as I have across these four years played many roles both in and out of the center—always a student, often a peer tutor, but occasionally a teacher and administrator, too—I have seen the communities to which I belong(ed) change, too, along with those of their community members (tutors, administrators, even student-writers), year to year and semester to semester.

Though I was, technically speaking, invited into my local, undergraduate writing center community from day one of my own training course—an intimate, once a week course in which we would come together over pizza to discuss writing center theory and practice¹¹—I don’t think I would have truly considered myself a member of either the local or global writing center community then. Maybe it was just as simple as feeling more like a student than a tutor—more like an individual writer than a hero or professional equipped to help others on their writing. It’s too far removed now for me to truly recall, so I can’t speculate what being a part of that first writing center “community”—broadly or locally—entailed or meant to me then.

Yet, the local space and community itself could have had something to do with how I felt my own identity reflected in (and, in some ways, rejected by) my undergraduate writing center. The institution of my first writing center was a small, private, Catholic college in urban

¹¹ This reminds me of Elizabeth Boquet’s discussion of the problem of trying to create a community for tutors in the writing center—“I am a problem… for trying to ‘organize’ the beginning of the year gathering, for ‘setting up’ the holiday party… for imagining that these efforts might create a sense of community rather than emerge from one” (26, emphasis in original).
Baltimore; it notoriously suffered from a lack of diversity, most notably with few members from the primarily African American community where the college was situated. There were also few international students—even fewer from non-English speaking nations—at our college, and our own small writing center staff reflected this lack of diversity quite obviously. The cramped basement space allotted for the writing center only allowed for three tutors plus a receptionist to work at a given time for most hours we were open; one of our administrators was generally in the space at any given time, and though all of them were truthfully well-intentioned, it was still stressful to remember that you were always in ear-shot of everyone else—something quite stressful for me, as a new tutor. Perhaps due to the small staff and/or space constraints, we did not have frequent staff meetings or gatherings; I honestly could not tell you the names of everyone with whom I worked.

The second writing center, at my current graduate institution, is part of a mid-sized, state university in a largely rural area; though a public school, it is also not exactly known for its diversity. The writing center itself is well funded and the staff is large; yet though its staff does represent some racial and even linguistic diversity—and there have been attempts to hire diverse students—it is still staffed primarily by white, traditional-aged, able-bodied students with high academic grades and proven aptitude in writing.

The space of the center could not be more different than that of my undergraduate writing center; it occupies a prime location on the first floor of the university’s library, open and quite spacious. An administrator is usually present in the space of the center, but the openness of the center always seemed, to me, to prevent the eavesdropping that made me so anxious as an undergraduate tutor. Importantly, there is also a sectioned off, glass-walled “Consultants’ Room” specifically for the writing tutors; it is a place for the tutors to gather on their “off” time (if they don’t have appointments, are waiting for their shifts to begin, or simply want to socialize), as well as a space for meetings and official business (schedules and group pictures of the staff decorate the wall, and staff mailboxes are in the room, as well). This space—physically apart from the workspace of the center, as well as the administration—seems to be an important boon of the center, as it will come up in my interviewees’ discussions later in this chapter.12

12 To give a brief introduction to the Consultants’ Room, the following is a description from Alicia’s final course portfolio: “…other consultants move in and out of their private, but inviting office space… I say ‘private’ because it seems clearly [sic] enough to me that it is specifically
But I am, of course, getting ahead of myself. The identity of the writing center community is a complicated issue; there are appeals to a global writing center community across our literature and texts, and insinuations of local writing center communities strewn about, as well, but rarely, if ever, are tutors’ own conception of, development in, and claims to such communities ever discussed. How do tutors think of our community/ies? Are they truly involved in these writing center communities? Do the writing center communities to which they belong change tutors’ own identities? In our haste to create writing center spaces that are “safe” for student-writers, have we ensured that tutors are “safe,” too? What happens when tutors do not feel themselves a part of the writing center community—globally or locally?

In the following chapter, I will examine how writing center literature constructs the writing center community, and subsequently how tutors-in-training and even experienced tutors fit—and do not fit—in such a vision of community. I will again use interviews conducted with tutors-in-training, though in hopes of providing more well-rounded interpretations of tutors’ and trainees’ experiences with community I will supplement their perspectives with those of experienced tutors who have been members in their local writing center community—broadly stated—for at least a semester. Ultimately, I argue that while most tutors do identify with both our local community of practice and the field’s conception of a global community, we would do well to learn from tutors who do not as readily identify with and join “our” communities, as their detachment may reveal veiled values in our tutor-training practices especially.

What Does “Community” Mean?

Before discussing the writing center community at large and allowing my interviewees to discuss “our” local community, it’s necessary to pin down precisely what “community” means, since, as Joseph Harris notes, “community can… become an empty and sentimental word”—though “it is a concept both seductive and powerful, one that offers us a view of shared purpose and effort and that also makes a claim on us that is hard to resist” (99, emphasis in original). 

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13 Because the experienced tutors did not provide any identifying information like gender, I will refer to them as “Tutor A,” “Tutor B,” etc., rather than using pseudonyms, as I have with my primary interviewees.
In the writing center context specifically, it’s easy enough to argue that just such a conception of community exists. As Elizabeth Boquet writes (discussing North’s “Idea”) in *Noise from the Writing Center*, “North… is much more strident than Bruffee in [his] insistence that there is an *us* in this community (though North never uses this word) pitted against a *them*” (29, emphasis in original)—that is, the writing center “community” came together, initially, based on a supposedly common opposition or threat to its members’ existence. Around the same time as his assertion, she notes, writing center organizations and associations began to form to build upon their members’ communal knowledge, yet, she explains that she has “been puzzled over the years by the continual reassertion of community in those regional and national writing center forums as [she has] learned that we can agree on virtually *no* characteristics that could identify us as a community” (30, emphasis in original)—besides, of course, the general type of tutoring in writing offered by members of the writing center “community.”

This is not to say that the members of said writing center “community” are ill-informed, or that such a community is fruitless. As Harry Denny writes in *Facing the Center*:

> Early on in my career, I stumbled into a community in writing center, complete with informal networks of colleagues, regional conferences, special interest groups, and national organizations. This world has unparalleled collegiality in the academy; mutual support and mentoring is never more than a telephone call… away. *But it’s a community not without problems, but ones it names and analyzes and ones that go unexamined and neglected.*

(“Introduction,” N.P.)

That is, as both Boquet and Denny agree, the writing center community—however vague such a notion may be—is certainly not without value for its members; it is an important system of support as well as a productive on-going “site” for conversation and scholarly inquiry. Yet, this community, characterized as a support system and built much on assumed outsider status as it is on “a sense of purpose… of knowing ‘who you are’” (Boquet 26), could be considered resistant to internal critique and even an overly sentimental (and rhetorically seductive) one, as cautioned against by Harris. It has the potential to mask difference in its push for commonality, as is perhaps hinted as in Denny’s work, above; as Melissa Ianetta reflects on the 2005 International Writing Center Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (IWCA/NCPTW)
call for presentations: “As represented in its CFP, a central concern for the IWCA/NCPTW 2005 conference was the multifaceted role of identity in writing center studies. Our home institutions are defined by ‘heterogeneity,’ yet we strive for a degree of ‘universality…’” (2006).

The push for “universality,” while it brings “us” together as a global community has the potential—like the monolithic construction of tutor identities discussed in Chapter 2—to sweep over differences in institutional locations, tutoring and professional staff, among other identity-shaping factors for a writing center community. And at the same time that such a sentimental conception of a writing center community masks these differences, it seems to continue the characterization of the writing center as a marginal, safe space—one that is, importantly, often represented as reactive and, at times, oppositional to the university and academic discourse at large, as seen in Boquet’s reading of North, above, and even in the opening of Boquet’s Noise from the Writing Center, which finds the author responding to a faculty member’s sternly-worded memo regarding the eponymous noise coming from what he deemed a writing center party (but that was, in actuality, a staff meeting).14

However, because my current focus is tutors’ own identities, rather than those of the writing center “community” at large, I am much more interested in depictions of local communities, particularly the local writing center communities to which I and my interviewees have belonged. In this regard, I borrow again from Harris, who writes, “I would urge an even more specific and material view of community… I think we need to look more closely at the discourses of communities than communities of discourse alone” (106). That is, Harris argues, our attention is misplaced if it only focuses on the common notion of community as discourse community, which he finds to be “unclear” at best and too easily associated with empty sentiment (101)15.

Though not explicitly in conversation with Harris, Geller et al.’s The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice seems, in many ways, to answer Harris’ call. The authors build

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14 The faculty member wrote: “I think it is inappropriate and discourteous to make such a racket as I heard coming from the Writing Center this evening. Even after I politely asked if the door could be closed, I again was interrupted by loud noises periodically coming from the Writing Center… The faculty office building is not an appropriate place for parties” (Boquet xiii).

15 The concept of discourse communities could be beneficial in discussion of tutors’ own identities and personal ties to community; however, a simplistic discussion of only the writing center discourse community as a standalone, un-interrogated entity would be reductive and perhaps even dismissive of local communities’ differences from one another.
upon Etienne Wenger’s work describing communities of practice—“group[s] of people who share a concern of passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, “Communities”)—to describe local writing centers as spaces where members (the tutors and professional staff) come together to “develop, negotiate, and share [their own theories and ways of understanding the world]” (Wenger 48, qtd. in Geller et al. 6). A community of practice is different from a community based on simply sentiment, as warned against by Harris, or an opposition to the university and supposed academic discourse, as warned against by Boquet, in that it requires three key elements: a domain, a community, and a practice.

The domain of the community of practice is, broadly put, the “shared interest” that the community of practice discusses, works in, etc.; those outside of the community may not necessarily see the domain as an area of “expertise,” but it is still something that sets its members in some way apart from outsiders. (Having a domain only seems to be the crux of North’s sense of community, above.) The community of the community of practice is “buil[t of] relationships that enable [members] to learn from one another”; though this could easily apply to multiple definitions of community, it is important to note that, as Wenger writes, “having the same job or the same title does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together”—there must be a voluntary effort put in to be a part of the community. Finally, the practice is active and shared; the community of practice’s members “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” through “shared interaction.” It is this aspect, the “practice,” that sets communities of practice particularly apart from general communities in that is demands an active membership, and both requires time and trust.

Just because there is a “community” present in a space does not necessarily mean that there is a community of practice in place. Merely being employed in a writing center and attending required staff meetings as a fly on the wall, for instance, may mark a tutor as a member of that writing center’s local community, but would not simply include him in its community of practice, if there were such a community at all. Rather, in order to be a member of an existing writing center community of practice, a tutor would have to voluntarily seek out help from and knowledge-making opportunities with other members of the community (such as fellow tutors)—and they from him and each other, as well.
Further, it is impossible to simply create a community of practice for a writing center; as Wenger notes, “communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor”—that is, it is the members themselves who form the community, the members who come together to work toward common goals and learn from one another. Though well-meaning administrators and writing center directors may try their hardest, no true community of practice can emerge solely from their influence. As Boquet laments in Noise from the Writing Center:

I am a problem… for trying to ‘organize’ the beginning of the year gathering, for ‘setting up’ the holiday party, for ensuring that there’s always food around (which the tutors of course appreciate). For imagining that these efforts might create a sense of community rather than emerge from one. (26)

That is—any community of practice (though she says only “community” above) must come from the tutors themselves, though conditions can be created that would encourage communities of practice to develop, as Geller et al. discuss throughout The Everyday Writing Center.

It seems important to reiterate the importance of tutors’ own identities, here, as well. Though writing center literature and texts, as I have argued in Chapter 2, tend to downplay and may even discourage diversity among tutoring staff, tutors themselves have diverse lived experiences; encouraging a community of practice in the writing center is encouraging tutors to draw on those diverse lived experiences and share them—though it will not, in any sense of the word, “free” them from the politics of the writing center or the university at large. Their identification with the writing center’s community of practice should not replace their former or concurrent identities; as Kenneth Burke writes in A Rhetoric of Motives, “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (21, emphasis added). This seems important to recall, as Geller et al. note, interactions within a writing center’s community of practice are not immune to “conflict, disagreement, competition, and disenfranchising hierarchical relations” because “writing centers—like all communities of practice—are ‘neither a haven for togetherness nor an island of intimacy insulated from political and social relations’ (Wenger 77)” (Geller et al. 7). That is, a tutor’s own identities, their own contexts of subjectivity—as discussed
in Chapter 2—are still an important aspect of their communities of practice, including the space of the writing center; their identification with such communities does not erase their own identities, as much as the literature cited in Chapter 2 would push it too.

The language used above seems to hark back to discussions of the writing center as a contact zone—a space where, borrowing from Pratt, two (or more) cultures come in contact with each other and thus one (or both) of them change in the mingling. In Janice Wolff’s “Tutoring in the ‘Contact Zone,’” for example, the author builds on Pratt’s work to contend that the writing center is a contact zone; as such, it is a site where hierarchies do exist—much to the chagrin of early and optimistic writing center theorists. Beyond this assertion, however, Wolff argues that the writing center has the chance of becoming more than just a contact zone—becoming, again borrowing from Pratt, a “safe house.” This safe house writing center would act as a nurturing space wherein tutors come to respect and help guide the writers they work with, and in the process learn to “negotiate in the political arena of the university […] and] become aware of contact zone symmetry, of the power they wield [and lack]” (50). Ultimately, tutors (and writers) in such a safe house writing center would be actively aware of, and working to circumvent or redistribute, the hierarchy in which they work (the university and academic discourse at large).

Wolff’s article, thus, seems to bring back in the liberatory aims discussed in Chapter 2, but it also seems an important complement to the discussion of diversity and necessary conflict in communities of practice, as described by Wenger and by the authors of The Everyday Writing Center. Though Wolff’s focus is the contact between tutors and the writers they work with, it could just as easily—and perhaps more meaningfully—be applied to tutors’ interactions with one another and with the writing center communities (of practice, local, global) to which they belong. In what ways are our communities changed by the tutors in them? And in what ways are tutors changed by their entrance into our communities—if they choose to join them at all?

While many of my informants (including three of the four trainees that I interviewed, and quite a few of the experienced consultants who answered my anonymous online survey) do fit in with the writing center community—that is, share its mission and are happy to identify with the center as it is constructed for them through writing center literature and texts—there are still those who do not, or those for whom the writing center “community” is not a given. It is important to examine the ways in which both tutors-in-training and experienced tutors identify with “our” communities, as well as the ways they do not, because, as Boquet writes, “we should
ask ourselves what to make of [tutors’] repeated and systematic denials” of “our attempts to create a community in the writing center” (27, emphasis added). That is, we would do well to learn from tutors who do not as readily identify with and join “our” communities, as their detachment may reveal veiled values in our tutor-training practices especially.

I will begin the following section—devoted to my informants’ take on their local writing center community—by introducing two tutors in particular, Emma and Jen, who represent quite different experiences with the writing center, as well as different individual identities themselves. I will complicate their stories with those provided by some of the experienced tutors, as well, in an effort to come to the most well rounded conclusions about their understandings of their identities-in-flux, local writing center community, and how they fit therein.

“…maybe I'll have that group once I'm working here.”: Jen’s Identity & Initial Experiences With Writing Center Community

Jen was a sophomore majoring in the College of Arts and Sciences at the time of our interviews; she is also a member of a Greek organization, as well as other extra-curricular clubs and activities. Though she was initially ambivalent about the work of the writing center—describing her confusion and “last minute” decision to apply for the position several times across our interviews—Jen ultimately came to identify whole-heartedly with the work and mission of the writing center, perhaps more-so than any other participant. Her interviews reveal the importance of the writing center community to her, both in her writing center training and in the actual writing center, as well.

As mentioned above, Jen was quite open about her motivation for applying to the writing center position, explaining in our second interview, “I applied on a whim because it was a better job than what I had.” She was also open in both our first and second interviews that she “didn’t really know anything about the writing center” and that she initially believed, like the other interviewees, that “it was more of an editing type thing,” which she had “always kind of been into… done that for friends.” This confusion was not something that Jen felt uncomfortable with or tried to spin in a way that might make her intentions seem more heroic or professional (as Will and Alicia may have done, described in Chapter 2)—rather, she simply adjusted her expectations and perceived notions of the writing center and the writing center tutor.

Unlike Will and Alicia—and Emma, to be discussed shortly—Jen did not seem to repeat writing center literature like North’s “Idea of a Writing Center,” but rather to take her own
approach to the “helping” rather than “fixing” work of the writing center. She explained, for example, that as a writing center tutor, she “want[ed] to be able to help people… not to annoy people.” As she continued to explain the social tutor role—the Community Builder role she perhaps wanted to occupy—it’s clear that she has internalized some of the writing center literature that she may have been reading, and that she is anxious about her own ability to do more than just edit:

I don’t want to be the person who’s like, ‘Oh, you did this wrong, you did this wrong,’ but [rather one of] the ones you see that are actually really good, where they’re actually having a discussion and that person’s really engaged. That’s what I want to be, but I don’t know… it will be a ways I think.

In the above quote, for example, she emphasizes discussion and engagement—two important key words for writing center literature and training texts—and the fact that having a discussion and engaging with a student-writer is an important end goal for herself as a trainee. Yet, she is also not yet confident in her abilities, as her cautious final words show.

Further, when asked about what anxieties she has about taking on the role of the writing center tutor, Jen explains, “…just not knowing what I’m doing and getting that confidence and be[ing] outgoing enough to engage people and be able to connect with them like that. I’m not sure how to do that yet.” These anxieties, like the one described above, are more clearly articulated than those of Will or Alicia, and interestingly seem to be primarily concerned not with knowledge of different subjects or writing genres, but rather the social aspects of writing center tutoring—with how to become, perhaps, a Community Builder.

These anxieties seem to indicate the importance of the writing center’s local community to Jen—including both relationships with writers, as described above, and with fellow tutors, as well. Again, in our first interview, when asked if she had yet been able to interact with the tutors and staff of the writing center, she explained: “…the staff seemed really close as a group, which is kind of cool, kind of intimidating coming into it at first, but it’s kind of nice to think, you know, maybe I’ll have that group once [I’m] working here.” Joining the writing center as a tutor seems for Jen to be about more than simply coming to the center, working, and leaving again; she is picking up on the existing community and identifying with it, seeking belonging in the “group” as much as she is seeking to be a productive employee. This seems in line with literature
and training texts that paint working in the writing center as “an experience that can change your life if you allow it to,” as Gillespie & Lerner write in *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, as well as the casting of the writing center world as one global community, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

“…it’s still a little confusing.”:

**Emma’s Identity & Initial Experiences With Writing Center Community**

Yet, not every tutor-in-training or even experienced tutor feels entirely a part of the local writing center community. As my interviews with Emma—and some of the anonymous experienced tutors—demonstrate the writing center community may not be easily attainable or an easy fit for all tutors, particularly those who do not as readily identify with the writing center mission to selflessly work to create better writers at the university. Emma, also a sophomore at the time of our interviews majoring in the College of Arts and Sciences, like Jen, did not fully understand what the role of a writing center tutor was; yet, unlike Jen, Emma did not seem as readily accepting of the tutor’s “helping” role that was being emphasized through her training. As she explained, “…right now I think that I eventually want to go into editing and publishing after I graduate and everything, and everything that we have read for the class so far as been, oh, you know, ‘it's not editing!’ and I’m just like, ‘okay.’” That is, Emma’s motivation for pursuing the writing center job was that she believed it would help her attain valuable experience on her journey to “go into editing and publishing after [she] graduate[s]”; yet she has been rather sternly censured by writing center texts, and as indicated by her resigned “okay,” seems to be tolerating, but not necessarily accepting, the common writing center understanding of tutor-as-helper, Hero, or Professional (described in Chapter 2) not as editor.

Emma’s motivation to become a writing center tutor is, thus, both similar and different to those expressed by the other interviewees. While she shares the misconception of a tutor as editor that many of the trainees faced, she is not entirely swayed by the scholarship on this point. She does not see herself as a Hero, and while she does have arguably a Professional take on the writing center job, her motivations are still much more centered on her own skill-development than the other trainees. Emma experiences a mismatch between how she perceived the role of the writing center tutor—as an Editor, detached from other writers—and the social role that the tutor is expected to take on. This seems additionally to be a point of tension and even hesitancy that prevents her from fully joining the writing center communities that she has access to, perhaps
because there are no available identities for her to align with or strive toward; editors are portrayed as useful to writers, but unequivocally outside of the writing center community, and in many ways editing is portrayed as the antithesis to the work of the center. As Gillespie and Lerner write in “The Tutoring Process,” a chapter in The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring:

…one of the most important contrasts in writing center work is the difference between editing and tutoring. You are probably a skilled editor, and your services are in demand from friends and classmates. Also, by no means do we want to denigrate the good work that many editors do (after all, you might choose that career); however writing center work is based on the belief that writers need to do the writing, not their tutors. Like any of the contrasts we presented, the tutor/editor one is on a continuum, and there’ll probably be instances outside of the writing center where you’ll be closer to the editing end (and hopefully be paid for that challenging service). (25, emphasis added)

Gillespie and Lerner make the effort to be polite concerning editors—acknowledging, above, that tutors are likely already good editors and may choose such a professional track in their futures—and while they acknowledge that the tutor/editor distinction must operate on a “continuum,” it’s clear which side of the continuum that they (and most, if not all, writing center administrators) prefer. The work of the Editor exists, but it is characterized as work “outside of the writing center,” work for pay, work that has the potential to “squelch any real learning on the writer’s part” (Gillespie and Lerner 26).

For a tutor or tutor-in-training who identifies most readily with the role of the Editor, like Emma, such admonitions may be alienating; it’s difficult to join a community—even one that thinks itself welcoming—if your own interests are wholly minimized by it. Thus, it seems, Emma is resistant to whole-heartedly accepting the tutor role that the writing center community has defined and called her to fulfill. Describing a session that she had recently observed in the writing center (a requirement of her training course), Emma explains that while the tutor didn’t edit the writer’s work, “a lot of [what the tutor did] was kind of just helping her clarify things. I guess that brings it back to fixing things, not that I think that's its all fixing things, but it is still
Emma’s assertion that tutoring still involved “fixing things,” seems to directly resist and challenge the Northian “better writers, not better writing” mantra that the other interviewees easily accepted as their own; she is not as readily convinced that writing center work is devoid of “fixing things” as an Editor would.

Despite her resistance, and the ways that her own identity as an Editor seems to clash with the available identities of Hero, Professional, and even Community Builder that the other interviewees seem to have taken up, Emma does describe a fairly positive, if not enthusiastic, interaction with some of the existing tutors: “The girl [an experienced tutor] that I was talking to was very nice, and I enjoyed talking to her even though I didn't really know her that much. And when I was sitting in the room [the Consultants’ Room] before I observed, I wasn't afraid to join the conversation, so that was good.” Emma seems also to recognize, without comment, the fairly tight-knit community of writing center tutors (as Jen does, earlier); while she does not express any special desire to be a member of the community, she doesn’t dislike the possibility, either. Perhaps compounding any difficulties she may feel latching onto an available writing center identity—which would, it seems, make joining the writing center community itself a difficulty—may be Emma’s own personality. That she notes she “wasn’t afraid to join the conversation” seems to hint that she has been anxious before in similar situations, and that she may still have anxieties about entering the community itself.

To summarize, Jen and Emma represent very different people, students, and tutors. Both came into their training course thinking that the role of a tutor would be, for the most part, the same as that of an editor. Yet, while Jen—like Will and Alicia describe in Chapter 2—was able to readily reconcile her own identity—as I’ve termed it above, as a “Community Builder”—with that of the tutor roles described by the training texts and literature she was reading, Emma seems to have had a more difficult time adjusting her expectations and matching her own “Editor”

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16 This description came after Emma explained that observing was “good,” because, “It was nice to be able to see an actual session instead of just reading about hypothetical ideals, because I like ideals, but they’re kind of unrealistic”—another moment that seems to ring of resistance to the writing center texts she has had exposure to, and perhaps a hint of her own anxiety (and reluctance) to emulate such “ideals.”

17 While I don’t want to blame Emma for being a naturally less social person than my other interviewees—I myself am a fairly introverted person, and still consider myself a member of the writing center community, after all—I do want to mention this because some tutors, like students, will simply not feel called to join the writing center community or seek approval from it because of their own personalities. Different strokes for different folks, as the saying goes.
identity to those provided by her course readings. Both expressed some anxieties about their abilities to become tutors, yet Emma seemed resistant to the writing center mantra of “better writers, not better writing,” in a way that none of the other interviewees did.

Though it’s impossible to draw conclusions based on such a small number of interviews across a semester, it seems as though the difficulty for Emma was that her own self-identity—as the Editor—was marginalized by writing center literature, causing her to feel initially resentful toward the writing center community. Jen, though, was readily able to match her own identity with the ideals and mission of the writing center community, and looked forward to joining it from the beginning of her training. As I will discuss below, Jen continued to identify with the writing center community, while Emma’s initial resistance also seemed to carry through her time in the writing center, though she did continue on to join its community as a writing tutor with the rest of my interviewees. I will also discuss, along with their “final” states, some of the answers from experienced tutors’ survey answers.

Jen & Student D: Writing Center Community Personified

As the discussion above has hopefully illustrated, Jen, perhaps more than any of the other tutors-in-training with whom I spoke, seemed especially keen to identify with and join the social reality of the writing center; her descriptions seemed to indicate that she was particularly receptive to working with her fellow tutors-in-training in class, for example. In our second interview, for instance, she described “practice consultations” done as a part of her training course, which allowed her to “talk it through with someone else who’s going through the same thing and kind of understand how they would approach [consulting] too.” Further, she described that “partner activities” like the practice consultations were “really good,” because “a lot of times [other tutors-in-training are] more connected to it because they’re going through it too,” whereas their instructor, though helpful, was “not as connected to the center with us.” This reliance on her peers over her professor or other “authorities”—and they on her, as well—seems to indicate a strong acceptance of the writing center community’s promotion of peers helping peers, as well as a continued positive feeling toward her own local writing center community.

Further, when asked to explain how joining the local writing center community—including the experienced tutors—was going for her, Jen explained that she didn’t know everyone very well, but that there was still a “community” that she was rapidly becoming a part of:
I feel like I still don’t know many of the older consultants very well, but I think that will come with more hours, that type of thing, because the ones I share shifts with I do know a little better. But they’re really welcoming; it’s really nice. Even just our class, our cohort or whatever is really close and like, I don’t know, it’s really interesting because I feel like a lot of people outside of it don’t understand what you do or why you would choose to [work in the writing center] and so the people there, you have in common with, they chose it too for some reason, they’re still doing it for some reason, and so you have that in common, bond over that. It’s kind of cool; it’s a different community than I’m used to.

Jen seemed fairly confident in her ability to continue her journey into the writing center community, based perhaps in the successes she had experienced in forming a community among her trainee peers. Both her description of in-class interaction with other tutors-in-training and of the writing center community itself suggest that this community is “different” than others Jen is “used to” because it is, in fact, a community of practice, as defined earlier. She and her peers—both in her training course and in the entire writing center—seem to be developing their community of practice as they “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” that fall within their domain, in this case peer tutoring (Wenger 2).

In addition, Jen appears to be distinguishing levels of involvement in her local writing center community, which may indicate who she feels is and is not included in its community of practice. Their professor, for example, is someone who Jen sees as a valuable resource (explaining that she “gives really good feedback… asking you to think deeper about whatever you might have written”), but also as someone less “connected to the center”—perhaps because their professor is not a current tutor, and is thus apart from the work Jen and her peers are active practitioners of. This logic would also seem to exclude other members of the administration who do not tutor from being included in the tutors’ community of practice. Though they share a domain and even a community with the tutors and tutors-in-training, they are not practitioners in the same sense that the tutors are.
In our third and final interview Jen also continued to mention how the writing center community was apart from others to which she belonged, as she explained, “more people, they don’t get [what tutors do], or they think it’s a lot more simple than it actually is… it’s easier just to talk to people who understand, who have been through it too.” This sets her apart, she notes, from her sorority sisters, to whom she has a hard time explaining, for example, why a consultation may have gone awry; it’s easier to avoid the topic or present it vaguely than try to discuss her work in the writing center. This may be a reason why tutors and trainees like Jen feel eager to join with the writing center community—as they step into the role of tutor, setting themselves apart from the university at large (as discussed in Chapter 2), they come to identify more with each other and further separate themselves from others.

It’s interesting to note, as well, that as Jen becomes more enmeshed in the writing center’s community of practice, she also becomes much more confident, explaining in our final interview that she did not have “as many anxieties as [she] thought [she] would.” She feels quite comfortable returning to the Consultants’ Room, described earlier, to swap “tricks to make [the opening of a tutoring session] last longer,” or just to “talk… about your consultations or what you could have done differently, or why that consultant was so bad or so good.” This, again, demonstrates her participation in the writing center’s community of practice, and her own investment in tutoring, as well. It also brings up the Consultants’ Room again, which, as alluded to earlier, seems to be a cornerstone of her local writing center community—it is an insular, “private” space (as described by Alicia in her final course portfolio; see footnote 2, earlier) in which the tutors (and tutors-in-training, usually) come together between tutoring (or observing) sessions to write their follow-up reports, prepare for their next sessions, and generally unwind. It is, as Jen indicates, a space for tutoring “talk”—a space safe for such “talk,” as it is usually free of both writing center administrators and the trainees’ course professor. The Consultants’ Room also serves as a library respite for tutors even off-duty; many will come when they are not working to have a space where they feel comfortable, as well as a space to socialize with their co-workers. As Jen explained, “I feel like a lot of times you would think you’d end up talking about randomness and a lot of times you do, at the same time and a lot of times you’re talking about your consultations.”

Yet, despite her seemingly encouraging interactions in both her classroom and in the Consultants’ Room, Jen did mention briefly in our final interview that she had “trouble with
authority and how to address things,” a common source of anxiety for new writing center tutors. Though it’s impossible to tell for certain, it could be that because she draws her confidence and strength from the community of the center, she feels less like an authority in the actual one-to-one work of tutoring. That is, her own identity as a social community-builder and member of a team may be hindering her understanding of herself as an individual. It could also be Jen’s internalization of the rhetoric of peer-ness discussed by Peter Carino (see Chapters 1 and 2) and writing center studies’ general reticence to accept tutorial authority, as well.

Much of what Jen describes regarding her role in the writing center and her involvement in its local community of practice seems to be reflected in what several experienced tutors described as well, particularly Student D. Student D, too, described that, for her, “the best part of the training was doing ‘practice’ consultations with other students in the class”—almost exactly the sentiment described by Jen—and further that she felt that “observations and feedback are really helpful because the consultant can have a real conversation with the person that witnessed them and maybe learn something new about their consultation style that they are not conscious of.” These statements particularly seem to privilege tutors learning from one another, as Jen did, as well; it is also interesting to note that Student D does not see this learning on a linear path, where learning stops once the course is over—she, too, appreciates the conversations that observations allow her to have with trainees, because they allow her to better understand her “style” and habits that she may “not [be] conscious of.”

Further, Student D—who is, again, a tutor who had been working at the writing center for at least a semester before participating in my survey—seems to share a Community Building approach to her work. When asked how she saw herself fitting into the university at large, she wrote:

_Frequently I see myself as a friendly face_ for students who are frustrated about their writing -- the assignment, the professor, the subject, their own skill level. _They need someone to vent to_ who can also help them be more efficient and productive, and I can fulfill both those needs. It's a bit uncomfortable at times because we're expected to provide answers that are almost as authoritative as those of a professor, but _for the most part I'm happy to be a_
sympathetic listener as well as a guide in the writing process.

(emphasis added)

Student D’s description is interesting in that, as mentioned earlier, she seems to share Jen’s concern for the community; she is a “friendly face” as well as a “sympathetic listener”—in short, she’s filling the role of a wise friend, rather than a Hero, Professional, or an Editor. Student D, too, feels discomfort when placed in a role where heightened authority may be necessary or attributed to her by a writer, perhaps because she, too, has internalized her role as a peer, or perhaps because she sees herself so enmeshed in the university’s community, as well as her local writing center community.

Finally, when asked if she felt like she was a member of the [local] writing center community, Student D wrote:

Definitely. Not only do we (the consultants) see each other on a regular basis at work, many of us are friends outside of work and voluntarily spend time together. I like being able to talk to these people about my life outside of the library, and I enjoy hearing their stories as well. Coming to the writing center means you'll always have someone to talk to, whether it's about exciting news or to blow off some steam. (emphasis added)

This echoes Jen’s assertion, above, that the writing center community is one filled with talk—talk about work, about “randomness,” and, as Student D described, “about… life outside of the library.” It is, as Boquet might say, a noisy place, but a productively, comfortably noisy place—a place in which tutors and trainees often do come together and, at least in some ways, come to represent the writing center ideal of peers helping peers. Tutors like Student D and Jen identify with one another, and come to value each other as resources for the sharing and creation of new knowledge; it provides them with comfortable reflections of themselves—Community Builders, Heroes, Professionals—and can be, as in their cases, empowering.

Emma and Student C: Writing Center Community Problematized

Yet, the writing center community is not, as Geller et al. and Wolff both cautioned, a safe haven free from conflict, nor is it, as Denny explained, a community free from large-scale issues of representation; simply not all tutors or trainees will find themselves neatly reflected in writing center values, and not all of them will find themselves as comfortable in “our” communities as
“we” have hoped. Emma’s resistance to both the writing center community at large and locally—or, perhaps, to the way the writing center community tried to portray and change her, the Editor—for instance seemed to continue throughout our interviews. For example, in our second interview, when asked about feedback from her peers, Emma explained:

…my one friend who's in the class with me, I was telling her about the one session I had that was kind of difficult and I didn't know what to do… She was like, “Yeah, that would be hard, but I don't really know what else you could have done.” So, I guess it, well with that situation, which is the only one I can think of… it was the sort of the feedback that was like—wasn't especially helpful.

Though perhaps not overly resistant, Emma is clearly not as convinced of the merits of the writing center community of practice as Jen and Student D were; her “one friend”—which seems to indicate that she has additionally not made many connections with fellow trainees—is not able to provide “helpful” advice to her, making the interaction altogether a seemingly unpleasant one. Emma also had a difficult time with the practice consultations that were praised by Jen and Student D, explaining that, it was “hard sometimes to be in the writer's position when you didn't actually write it,” and that “you just feel kind of silly, like it's not actually helpful.” These kinds of training activities, which focus both on building tutors’ repertoires of tutoring skills as well as their relationships with one another, seemed to involve, perhaps, too much community involvement for Emma with too little pay out—her peers didn’t have good suggestions and simulated consultations felt forced.

This discomfort also seemed to continue into the general space of the writing center, including the aforementioned Consultants’ Room. Emma expressed more hesitancy than the other interviewees, indicating that she only feels “sort of” a part of her local writing center community, which has proven to be “confusing.” She explained, “I feel like I don’t even know people’s names a lot of times, so I feel a little uncomfortable.” Despite this unease, however, Emma did report in our final interview that she was making progress in joining the community:

I’ve started to feel a little bit more comfortable talking to people that I don’t even know their names, and, um, and when I do talk to them, even if I don’t know them, they’re perfectly nice and
everything, so… that’s good, but, um, yeah, so I feel like I don’t know everyone and everything, but, not like fully out of it.

Emma’s tone is markedly different from Jen’s, earlier. While both expressed that they did not yet feel fully immersed in the writing center community, Jen was hopeful and confident that membership would come in time; Emma, however, seems much more ambivalent toward joining the community—she avoids being outwardly critical (perhaps because she viewed me as a writing center authority), but is clearly less enthusiastic about the process.

Further, even in our final interview, Emma seems much less invested in the work of the writing center than Jen, Will, or Alicia. When asked how she might explain her tutoring role to someone who was unfamiliar with the writing center, she shakily described the writing center mission:

I’d, you know, say that we help with your writing, um, it doesn’t matter where you are, if you haven’t started writing it yet, or if you’re revising it, or if you want to proofread it, stuff like that, we can work on that… So, yeah, I guess, just kind of sort of somebody that you can talk to what’s bothering you at the very least, and maybe it will help you think through stuff.

Emma’s description is filled with hesitancies—“you know,” “um,” “I guess”—that seem to indicate a lack of confidence and perhaps even a lack of identification with her role as a tutor. She seems to be grasping for the right words to say to show that she could explain it—again, perhaps to show to me, a perceived authority in our writing center community, that she has identified with the writing center and her role as a tutor, that she has reformed her Editor ways (which have been, as mentioned earlier, condemned by the texts she’s been reading for class).

Emma is not, however, the only one of my informants not to fit so neatly in with the writing center “community.” While she does not, in the end, seem to outwardly challenge the writing center community as she did in our first interview, Student C, as experienced tutor, seems much more explicit about the ways in which she does not, perhaps, fit the writing center mold. Unlike Emma, Student C did give credit to the peer techniques used in training. She wrote about the mentoring system, in which a new tutor is paired with an experienced one: “I think that, socially, mentoring is the most valuable; this provides consultants with someone who is available to answer their questions, and gives them a sort of comfort zone as new consultants.”
This seems to indicate a level of appreciation of the writing center’s local community and its members’ ability to learn from one another.

Yet, it also seems that there may be a tension for Student C between the social reality for tutors and in their interactions with student-writers. When prompted to describe the tutor’s role, she wrote, “I would (and do) describe the position as a tutor who focuses more on the development of students' writing skills than on just answering questions or focusing on subject matter.” This description seems to skip over the social aspects of tutoring, focusing instead on abstract “development” of skills. Further, Student C’s descriptions seem to focus heavily on her own skills; she notes that she has “a lot of experience in communicating with students and facilitating their learning,” and, unlike most of my other informants, she felt “comfortable taking charge [in a tutoring session], and letting [the writer] know what my thoughts are,” even if they were not in line with the writer’s. These statements seem to elevate the Student C above the role of a peer, which is further compounded by her description of a time she struggled with her own authority or place in the university at large:

I sometimes struggle when I have instructors/professors who assign trivial writing assignments that I feel I do not need to complete (for example, the worksheet on "how to read a journal article" I completed last week). As a consultant I believe that I have above average understanding of reading and writing concepts, and at times can become frustrated with overly simple assignments.

Student C seems to be responding to the position she has assumed in the writing center in a way unlike the Hero, Professional, or the Community Builder; her own ethos is built up by the trust she is given, and it has caused her to feel “above” some class assignments, perhaps even resentful of professors’ not recognizing her potential. This kind of attitude certainly flies in the face of the rhetoric of peer-ness, and risks the delicate balance often attempted by writing center communities; it could also be antithetical to one of the basic tenets of a community of practice—that members believe they have much to learn from one another. (That is, if Student C already believes herself “above” the “average” tutor, she may be less likely to seek communal knowledge-building.)
Student C had a very intriguing response to the question of her belonging to the writing center community, one that is different from all other interviewees and survey participants. She wrote:

Yes and no; I feel that I am part of the community at Howe, but not necessarily of the larger writing center community as a whole. Our center is somewhat different than others, and I feel as though we are in a kind of "bubble" when it comes to how we do things and how our center operates.

Unlike the other tutors, Student C drew a distinction between our local community and the global writing center community—describing a split between the two in that she feels isolated from other centers. This enigmatic comment is difficult to discern, but it seems that Student C may wish to be more professionally involved—to be recognized in the “larger” community—and may take issue? with the way the writing center is operated. Perhaps because she is identifying herself as “above average,” as someone more deeply in tune with what student-writers need, Student C feels stunted in her local writing center community—trapped in a “bubble,” as she put it, and unable to get the recognition she would like.

Thus, it seems that both Emma and Student C also have very different notions of themselves—Emma more clearly as an Editor, Student C as, perhaps, what Bruffee termed a “Little Teacher” (446)—than Jen, Will, Alicia, or the available identities provided to them by the writing center community through its training texts and literature, which value nothing so much as viewing tutors as selfless peers on equal ground with student-writers. The subtle—and sometimes not-so-subtle—resistance that Emma and Student C displayed, though both were successfully employed at the writing center and were, presumably, perfectly fine tutors therein, may clue “us” into the ways that our texts can marginalize tutors who don’t necessarily share the global writing center community’s vision.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by discussing the ways in which writing center literature and training texts cast the writing center community as a global, often homogenized entity, as well as the potentially diversity-squelching consequences that such a construction of community has. I then moved on to discuss the local writing center communities that I have been a part of before finally
moving on to discuss the ways in which Emma, Jen, Student C, and Student D discussed both their individual identities and their involvement in their local writing center community.

As with my previous chapter, I do not wish to cast any of my participants as solely formed by the writing center literature they have read or the communities that they are a part of, which would be both overly reductive and untrue. Though Emma, for example, had difficulties feeling fully “at home” in our local writing center community, she was still a successful, often fully booked writing center tutor. She was friendly and helpful, and, despite her discomfort, did participate in the writing center community on numerous, frequent occasions. Further, Jen, though expressing a bit of unsteadiness regarding her “authority” in particularly tense writing center situations, also came to discuss, quite comfortably, how she had, in fact, used appropriate authority in situations that called for it. For example, Jen successfully worked on her own to guide an ELL student through a grammar worksheet by guiding her through resources rather than simply answering the questions for the student or telling her if she was right or wrong. Neither tutor seemed, to me as an “outside” observer, to be hindered or determined by our writing center community—rather, they developed in very different ways along side of “our” community.

In the following chapter, I will bring the above discussion of community together again with a discussion of identity and hope to offer some suggestions for improved writing center practice. It is only by interrogating the identities we expect our tutors to hold—and why those particular identities seem so important—that, I argue, we will be able to move past such simplistic categories and invite more diversity into our writing center communities. Further, I assert that only by encouraging our tutors to similarly interrogate the identities they themselves occupy—as conflicting and shifting as they may be—can we truly hope to encourage them to create “safe house” communities for both themselves and the writers with whom they work.
Conclusion:
Learning from Tutors’—and Our Own—“Identity Issues”

When I began this project a year ago, I had no idea the kinds of stories my interviewees would tell, or the ways in which I myself would come to feel transformed by them. Though my original focus on feedback and its role in shaping tutors-in-training didn’t pan out, I think it was a bit of a blessing in disguise, as it allowed me to better get in touch with what my interviewees and anonymous survey participants truly were interested in. And above all, it reminded me that writing center tutors are bright, hardworking students; as Elizabeth Boquet describes in *Noise from the Writing Center*, they “are placed, on a daily basis, in impossible positions,” and yet still “students flock to the tutoring class and then to the Writing Center because that im/possibility is the challenge, is the passion” (20). Tutors like Will, Alicia, Emma, and Jen continue to give, give, give of themselves to others—as they have to me, not only as volunteer interview participants, but as wonderful coworkers and even co-learners.

Yet, as I have strived to show in the previous chapters, our tutors are, in many ways, victims to our rhetoric—pigeonholed and reduced by the ways we have written about them across writing center literature and, perhaps most notably, in writing center training texts. As a field, we seem to have expectations that are both contradictory and covert—we want our tutors to play the Hero and fight the oft-oppressive minions of academic discourse, but they should also remember to be Professionals and never question a professor’s judgment, even if it does ring awfully of injustice. Tutors are often recommended to us for their prodigious skill as Editors, but the second they cross the writing center threshold we command them to confess, repent, and accept the Community Builder role we’ve so graciously prepared for them.

Unsurprisingly, these provided identities are not easy fits for our tutors, and they do not come to identify with them without on-going personal struggles. No tutor is a tabula rasa just waiting for us to inscribe our ideologies upon them; as we are so keen to note of students (but so apt so ignore when it comes to tutors), tutors come to us already belonging to various communities and embodying, at any given time, a number of identities—to quote Kenneth Burke again: “…one need not scrutinize the concept ‘identification’ very sharply to see, implied in it at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division” (23). Despite the many ways that our tutors may genuinely come to identify with the roles we have laid out for them—and with our nearly-universal Northian aim of producing “better writers, not better writing”—there will always be
ways in which they do not, ways in which their “belonging” is built more upon the rhetoric of our community/ies than total conformity.\(^\text{18}\)

Consider again, for example, the lack of representations of tutors with non-normative identities: tutors who have, perhaps, not aced every English class (or are perhaps not English majors at all!); who have come from working class backgrounds; who are non-native speakers; who have a disability; or whose bodies signal racial or gendered differences. As Harry Denny writes in *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*, there is a “collective dissonance between writing center personnel and the people with whom they worked” (5), a split between the they-who-need-help (the non-normative “Others”) and the we-who-dispense-the-help (the exemplarily normative tutors). My own interviewees—one of whom I know from personal context to come from such “non-normative” roots—make no mention of ways in which they “divide” from the writing-center-approved identities provided to them; it is as if, in stepping into the writing center, they must pretend to be devoid of their own “social categories” and the subjectivities that come with them—or risk being ousted from their coveted role of writing center tutors.

Yet, as Deborah Britzman writes in *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*: “To refuse the effects of such [social, contextual] meanings does not banish them from the lived world of the classroom [or the writing center]… Instead, the repressed always returns: the denial of difference is lived as the suppression of difference” (235). Perhaps this denial-turned-suppression is at the heart of the oft-criticized “gate keeping” role that the writing center (and its tutors) can so easily come to fill—if we are not committed to locating and celebrating diversity with our own local communities of tutors, how can we truly expect our writing centers to become “safe houses” for students or tutors?

Thus, it seems that, as writing center directors or teachers or general practitioners, we owe it to tutors to carefully examine our own depictions of and expectations for them. Do we want tutors to uphold rigid academic discourse and professors’ standards as Professionals, or do we want them fighting for student-writers’ decisions as Heroes? Are we so set on having a team full of Community Builders that we are unable to meet the Editors among us where they are and make use of their talents in perhaps different ways? Ultimately, I mean to suggest, directors and

\(^{18}\) “…we are clearly in the region of rhetoric when considering the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class. ‘Belonging’ in this sense is rhetorical” (Burke 28).
those training their writing center tutors must interrogate the identities they want their tutors to have, to question why those particular identities are so important in their local writing center and university communities, to be explicit in their expectations, and to make sure their training texts appropriately reflect those expectations, as well. Yet, beyond analyzing our expectations for and the identities we project onto tutors, we also owe it to tutors—particularly as they are in training, but throughout their work as tutors, as well—to remember that they, like the rest of the beautifully diverse student body at our institutions, have a wealth of lived experiences and perspectives that deserve our full attention. We cannot expect—and should not hope—to completely refashion or reshape them into an army of uniform tutors, asking tutors to forget themselves as students and espouse a singularly academic-discourse-friendly, professional stance.

It seems to flow naturally that, second, we owe it to our tutors and tutors-in-training to invite their contexts of subjectivity into the writing center and into training courses—and we owe it to the students they work with in our writing centers to ask our tutors and tutors-in-training to think very carefully about how those contexts have shaped who they are and what they believe. Even in the most seemingly homogenous universities, for instance, there are lessons to be learned by asking tutors how they came by their literacies and what it means to be white, or female, or able-bodied, or non-native-speaking—and how these shape (and perhaps constrain) their world views, both in and out of the writing center, the university, etc. For, as Lisa Delpit writes in *Other People’s Children*, only through “reflecting on our own experiences, analyzing our own culture, examining and comparing varying perspectives” can we hope to “interpret across cultures” (151)—and hope for our tutors to do the same.

I whole-heartedly follow Deborah Britzman in her call for a very Bakhtinian “concern with the dialogic,” which, in its “concern with… production” would “acknowledge… multiplicity: the ways talk, practice, and understanding are mediated by difference, history, point of view, and the polyphony of voices” in the discourse surrounding writing center work and particularly tutor-training. This seems complementary to Nancy Grimm’s assertion in *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Post-Modern Times* that writing center professionals and tutors are called to “acknowledge the ways writing center work positions undergraduates (and the entire staff within the culture of power)” by, among other things, insisting on tutors’ “remembering their personal, cultural, and historical limits, learning to deliberately call attention
to what they don’t know and to their own habits of performance” (113). Similar suggestions are found across numerous recent texts, such as Anne Geller et al.’s *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, which encourages writing center directors and professionals especially to make themselves (and their tutors) comfortable with the unknown, with the slippages of everyday writing center practice, as well as Denny’s *Facing the Center*, in which he encourages us to “unpack how we do identity and to what effect in everyday sessions” and to move beyond such interrogation by applying it to research and action in the writing center profession at large (146-7).

Such interrogations of ourselves and our profession—and for our tutors, as well—have the potential to break the reductive identity categories currently thrust upon tutors by calling us to see the ways that, despite our genuine calls for allowing students to explore their own diverse experiences and community memberships, we have failed to do so for our own writing center tutors. It would further, I believe, allow tutors to more comfortably recognize the overlaps between themselves and those they tutor—allow them to openly discuss with students the ways that they, too, have struggled to master some arbitrary aspect of academic discourse or another, rather than pretending that they have known it all of their lives.  

Here, again, I would like to interject a brief narrative of my own—a writing center situation that I have no doubt is similar to those faced by so many tutors at universities with even modest populations of English Language Learners (ELL). For some weeks, I worked with an international student on a personal statement for a graduate program. Initially, to my great relief, the writer declared that she did not want help on her grammar (as so many of “those” students do, writing center texts and lore tell us), but rather on developing the ideas in her statement, which were still quite rough. After multiple sessions together, filled with great conversations not only about the content of the personal statement at hand, but also with discussions of future plans and hobbies and even cultural differences in education, the higher-order concerns had been exhausted. With some trepidation I let us turn to the oft-avoided and ever-perilous lower-order concerns present in her paper.

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19 This would seem to answer calls from Denny, Grimm, and Marilyn Cooper that tutors act, in ways, as “cultural informants,” laying bare expectations and their own journeys as writers so that it does not seem such formidable task for the writers they work with.
I felt slightly uncomfortable with the task, writing center-isms buzzing around loudly in the back of my mind, but I also felt a duty to the writer, with whom I’ve worked for weeks and for whom this document could have serious consequences. In the middle of one of our newly sentence-level and pattern-of-error focused sessions, the writer pointed to an elegant, though not wholly appropriate phrase in the statement, and asked what I thought. As I paused to collect my thoughts, the writer told me: “This is written in my native way. I need you to help me say it the American way.”

I had been tutoring for a few years at the time this incident took place, and I still felt unprepared for that painfully blunt statement; I shouldn’t have been shocked, but I was. My identity as a graduate student—which this personal statement would hopefully allow her to be—knew how stressful this time was for her, and how important sounding just right truly was. But my competing identities gave me pause—wasn’t I studying composition theory? Didn’t I want to be a hero—to free, rather than oppress, this student? Wasn’t I supposed to be indirect or offer a story or encourage her to use her “voice”? Ultimately, my identification with her as a fellow would-be graduate student took over; I helped her sound “American,” even though I felt dirty about it afterwards, as though I had, as Boquet discusses, helped her scrub clean her text, helped her rid any impurities or unhygienic remnants of inappropriate language (20-23).

My interviewees, including Will (whom I discussed in Chapter 2), reported similar incidents of being particularly hailed by the tutor-as-Hero rhetoric present in our literature and training texts. He shamefully recounted the “grey” areas of working with ELL students, with whom he, too, could identify, as he explained the tension between his own identifications and the Northian mission of “better writers, not better writing”:

I guess with international students, I don’t know how far I should push their writing into a more native ear. So of course I ask the question, “Are you okay with this sounding native?” And of course they say yes, so—it just helps me, but I know I’m forcing their yes out of their mouths, but—that, that is the grey area.

These moments are inextricably tied to identity—to identities ascribed to us as tutors and to identities we ascribe to the writers with whom we work. After reading Delpit and Denny especially, I can’t help but wonder if these areas would feel so grey, so murky, so dirty, if either Will or I were discussing helping native or otherwise normative writers—would we feel as
 pressured to encourage fellow white writers to just accept their voices and lie about the unimportance of grammatical correctness? Why or why not?

I clearly, even in this, my conclusion, have more questions than answers, more “situations” for consideration than ideal models for study. I don’t want to suggest that I have a full understanding of the complex ways in which my identity or those of my interviewees’ interact with our roles as writing center practitioners. Yet, it does seem that both the global writing center community and its local communities need to allow more room for interrogation of identities in flux, identities in conflict, and even identities in community settings. I feel that there is much left for “us”—and here I am speaking more directly to the theory-and-training-text-writers—to do. As discussed in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, our current training texts are woefully inadequate on issues of diversity—they neither represent nor invite tutors of diverse backgrounds. This may partially be do to a staffing issue—maybe tutoring staffs are, in fact, primarily able-bodied, white, and middle-class—but it likely is also from a lack of the critical questioning suggested above. Unless we can find some way to represent tutors that does not estrange them from diversity—for instance, by making diverse students “others” in need of their help, rather than allowing that it could be the other way around—these texts will do little but continue to homogenize our writing center communities, and estrange students who do not fit neatly therein.

It’s not lost on me how difficult Emma found joining our local writing center community, how torn she felt as a new tutor and someone who genuinely wanted to pursue editing as a future career—a profession not-so-secretly considered as villainous, suspicious, and “Other” by many writing center texts. We need to work on valuing all tutors’ experiences, or own up to the fact that there are simply some perspectives that we will not abide (rather than pulling a bait-and-switch routine on our would-be tutors). Though Emma’s point of difference is not one as serious, perhaps, or life-long as any of the biographical identity categories listed earlier (race, gender, ability, nationality, etc.), I think there is still a lesson to be learned about how we treat those we invite into our communities.

20 Here, again, I feel compelled to quote from The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring: “Like any of the contrasts we presented, the tutor/editor one is on a continuum, and there’ll probably be instances outside of the writing enter where you’ll be closer to the editing end… When you do this kind of editing… you are assuming a large measure of control… [that] can squelch any real learning on the writer’s part” (Gillespie and Lerner 25-26).
On the subject of community, though, I would like to end on a positive note. At the end of our Spring semester at the writing center, all of my interviewees were successful employed in our writing center and had done some truly great work therein; as far as I am aware, all of them intended on coming back to the center again the following year. Though Emma expressed difficulties in joining the local community (a community of practice, as I have characterized it in Chapter 3), nearly all other interviewees and anonymous survey participants spoke very highly of the mentor program at writing center as a great community builder. This program pairs a new tutor (fresh out of the writing center training course) with an experienced tutor (who has worked at least a semester or more in the writing center). The mentoring team is then expected to meet across the semester, to observe one another and provide feedback on each other’s tutoring strategies, and to present for the other mentoring groups a year-end project of their own design on an issue related to tutoring (such as establishing rapport with students, effective body language, etc.).

Though not all mentoring teams are perfectly matched or wildly successful, they, at very least, seem to provide a valuable community-building boost; the system gives a new tutor a direct line into the pre-established local community, and it reinforces that both new and experienced tutors still have much to learn and share with others. As Alicia explained in our final interview, “I like the mentor program. I think that’s cool because I feel like I can text or call [my mentor] whenever I have a random question, and we work well together, and it’s made me feel like it’s my leeway into connecting with the older consultants.” This personal connection may begin to allow tutors to bring their identities into the writing center, as they are likely to feel more comfortable disclosing personal subjectivities and even working through them in one-to-one, peer-based experiences—something clearly near and dear to our writing center missions.
Works Cited


