POSTCOLONIALISM, ACCULTURATION, AND THE WRITING CENTER

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Peer tutoring in the university writing center exists to help students become better writers, especially students without a strong background in academic writing. When viewed through the lens of postcolonial theory, however, tensions arise between postcolonialism's focus on preserving a student's identity and the writing center's pedagogical imperative to change the writer—ostensibly for the better. Tutors can inadvertently urge students to acculturate themselves into academic discourse—permanently altering the way students think and write. But how could we, as writing center peer tutors, not help students become better writers because we fear their assimilation into the dominant culture? At the same time, how can we help students adapt to academic discourse without destroying their identities?

In this essay, I use two case studies from my experience as a writing center tutor at Georgetown University in an attempt to address these difficult questions. The two selected cases illuminate two important concepts explored in this paper: first, postcolonial thought and its implications for writing center pedagogy; second, the implications of implementing this pedagogy and its accompanying tutoring practices. The students in the case studies have extensive problems with writing mechanics, along with other associated problems—a lack of confidence in or frustration with their writing, a pattern of incomprehensible sentences, and, most significantly, an inability to recognize problems with their writing. These are challenging obstacles to overcome, and my experiences illustrate the difficulties encountered when trying to help these clients. As I will demonstrate, my approach occasionally—and unconsciously—integrated elements of postcolonial theory, which I had been studying in class at that time. My failure to do so consistently, however, shows the need for a systematic postcolonial tutoring approach.

A Center for Improving Writers, or a Center for Acculturation?

Kenneth Bruffee believes the purpose of education is to "reacculturate" basic writers, that tutors and teachers should help students "gain membership in another . . . [knowledge or discourse] community" by teaching its "language, mores, and values" (8). Acculturation requires the student to learn "a new discourse," which has an undeniable "effect on the re-forming of individual consciousness" (Lu, "Conflict and Struggle" 889). Students often initiate themselves into the academic discourse through acculturation—with little choice to do otherwise, as Bronwyn Williams also claims. Examples of students acculturating themselves are indicative of the incredible difficulties of the process. Williams recalls a common justification, that the "students' long-term interests" are best served by acculturation into American thought, if the students want to succeed in Western fields. This is accomplished when the teacher "takes on a civilizing role not unlike the colonial authority's," ensuring that students acculturate themselves "to the norms of the dominant culture" (590).

Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski argue that students in general, and underprepared students especially, learn the standards of academic writing in a haphazard way, without explanation for the existence of the standards. Students are then inclined "to treat writing as a code they must some-

how crack—a guessing game—instead of something that they must participate in creating" (55). Belief in the existence of a naturalized code of academic writing manifests itself in the writing of underprepared students in various ways. In this context, where acculturation ostensibly occurs for a student's best interest, acculturation is believed to be a necessity in educating the underprepared—a sentiment that sometimes exists in the writing center.

In my experiences as a writing center tutor, the most common problem for underprepared students is a kind of hypercorrection, where students were told a rule (or are perhaps misremembering one) and misapply it, creating awkward or even unintelligible prose. No wonder "academic discourses appear as stagnant, artificial, and arbitrary formulas"; writing is then reduced to "a guessing game," where the student feels she must absorb the code of academic writing, wherever it is found, and acculturate herself (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 55).

But in reality, Bruffee's seemingly harmless call for acculturation is simply the end result of the unquestioned assumptions underlying the pedagogical ideas of Stephen M. North in his article "The Idea of a Writing Center." In defining an axiom for the writing center, North emphasizes that its job is "to produce better writers, not better writing" (237).

Postcolonialism and Writing Centers: Moving toward Critical Consciousness

Bawarshi and Pelkowski outline the dangers of North's approach to writing center pedagogy: with the emphasis on the process of writing rather than the product, on the writer rather than the text, "in a writing center . . . the writers . . . are what get changed by instruction" (North 237). North's implicit assumption is that change is an improvement, just like the examples provided by Williams, where change is "for the students' 'own good,' so they can more successfully work within the framework of the dominant culture" (Williams 590). Bawarshi and Pelkowski characterize the language used by North as imperialist, relying on essentialist appeals such as "The whole enterprise seems to me most natural," which allows interference with not only the text but also the writer (North 239).

The writing center undoubtedly helps students; however, the prospect of changing underprepared writers should not remain unquestioned. Postmodern and postcolonial consideration of discourses necessitates the questioning of "essentialist notions of writing as somehow ideologically innocent or even empowering," which is an incredibly dangerous aspect of North's unquestioned assumptions (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 46). Changes are intended to make the student's work acceptable at the college level, which means that the writing center is "generally unconcerned with critiquing academic standards, only with facilitating students' participation within them" (47). One of the unfortunate consequences of this uncritical perspective toward a monolithic academic discourse is a general discomfort with ambiguity and contradictions within writing styles, which are manifestations of the inherent contradictions within a person's identity.

In my view, Bawarshi and Pelkowski's essential notion of critical consciousness should underpin writing center tutoring in all forms. They characterize critical consciousness, a term taken from Edward Said, as a "critical and self-reflective form of acculturation" (42). Critical consciousness allows students to understand "why and how certain features of academic discourse come to be features in the first place," removing the condescending essentialism and allowing underprepared students to understand the standards of academic writing on their own terms (54). The related ability to allow for contradictions and ambiguity within the individual's identity has been called "new mestiza consciousness" by Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (80). Without the framework of mestiza consciousness, underprepared students may be inclined to see the

difficult contradictions in their writing—the blend of academic writing conventions with standards rooted in the writer's background—as a personal failure. Lu has demonstrated that students sometimes see these contradictions as signals, indicating "their failure to 'enter' the academy, since they have been led to view the academy as a place free of contradictions" ("Conflict and Struggle" 897). Due to what Bawarshi and Pelkowski call "its physically and politically peripheral place—marginalized from and yet part of the university," the writing center is an ideal location for the practice of critical and mestiza consciousness, marking it as a contact zone for different discourses (42).

Mary Louise Pratt defines the contact zone as a space where "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). The concept of the contact zone is thus incredibly relevant to the contemporary writing center, which is situated in the postcolonial world. Mina Shaughnessy points out students' awareness of the contact zone, manifested in underprepared students' ambivalence toward acculturation, complicated by their anxiety to emulate the academic discourse (194). As Lu explains in her article "Conflict and Struggle," Shaughnessy is seeking to help students dissolve, not maintain, this ambivalence (904–6). Lu emphasizes the impetus to maintain the underprepared student's feelings of contradiction: "Because this ambivalence arises from sources well beyond the classroom—coming from the unequal power relationships pervading the history, culture, and society my students live in—not all students can or even want to get rid of all types of ambivalence" ("Professing Multiculturalism" 448). Envisioning the writing center as a contact zone can help maintain an ambivalence toward acculturation, effecting the creation of critical, mestiza consciousness in both tutors and clients.

While Bawarshi and Pelkowski stress the need for "helping marginalized students function within academic discourses," they are much more interested in discussing how discourses affect individuals and how the individual can achieve "critical consciousness." Bawarshi and Pelkowski emphasize that underprepared students should be instilled with an awareness "of how the mastery of academic discourses affects their home discourses" (53); but beyond implementing the concept of critical consciousness as a pedagogical guide, how can tutors in the writing center help underprepared clients? In terms of the postcolonial framework, the writing center is an exchange where dominance takes the form of a service, described as good writing: "in accepting the service . . . the oppressed consent to their own domination" (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 51). This leads tutors and other writing teachers to confront a false dilemma: acculturation or a rejection of this exchange? Following Anzaldúa, the goal of the postcolonial writing center is to implement the third option, helping writers achieve mestiza consciousness, defined by Bawarshi and Pelkowski as "a consciousness marked by the ability to negotiate multiple, even contradictory, subject positions while rooted in dominant discourse" (52). Teaching and exploring the idea of mestiza consciousness enables instruction to move beyond a criticism of the dominant ideology, allowing the student to engage with both academic and her own discourse, and thus maintaining ambivalence toward acculturation.

Treating the writing center as a contact zone allows student such as Alison or Emma (in the following case studies) to assess "what happens to their experiences—what happens to them—when they begin to master academic discourses" (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 52). Tutors in the writing center should teach underprepared students how to awaken their mestiza consciousness, to shift between different discourses, not just "encourage marginalized students to resist academic discourses or . . . have them privilege one discourse over another" (53). The postcolonial writing center can accomplish this by helping underprepared students understand the standards of academic writing, without relying on essentialist explanations; students should be taught how to analyze writing conventions them-

selves, so they have the ability to understand any discourse. The client is then no longer forced to guess what someone else wants, allowing underprepared students like Emma to understand "how writing constitutes [her] into a discourse community's social pattern of action . . . potentially pre-clud[ing] any threat to [her] home discourse" (55). In this instance, understanding the importance and uses of academic discourse allows the underprepared student to choose how and when to use the conventions of academic writing, enabling the student's mestiza consciousness.

Creating a postcolonial writing center is an invitation to challenges of contradiction and dynamic tension between discourses and conventions of writing. Lu cautions that some concerns are inherently irresolvable, since they remain part of the discussion between tutors and underprepared students when confronting contradictory discourses: "How to voice and talk to rather than speaking for or about the voices of the 'other' within and among cultures is thus not a question which can be resolved . . . outside of the process of negotiation. Rather, it must . . . [guide] our action as we take part in it" ("Professing Multiculturalism" 456). There are many real concerns, such as those encountered by Jay Sloan, a writing center director at Kent State University, who attempted to redefine the writing center as a contact zone. The response from his tutors was mixed, as evidenced by the reflection of one particularly skeptical tutor:

> I recognize what you are trying to do . . ., but it is very challenging to attempt to do it here in the Writing Center. It's very hard to politely challenge one's personally held views regarding a controversial thing like race. My problem is that I want the writer's paper to remain their property, under their control. . . . I don't want to influence them too much, but on the other hand, I recognize that they may need . . . someone to help them see a different point of view.

In contrast, Lu's experiences suggest that students will retain control over their texts; in fact, the greater worry is whether students would still desire to learn the standards of academic writing if given a choice of perspective. Lu quells this worry, however, explaining that "the unequal sociopolitical power of diverse discourses exerts real pressures on students' stylistic choices" ("Professing Multiculturalism" 457). Students have chosen to go to college and want to succeed, which means they must engage with the dominant academic discourse. As Bawarshi and Pelkowski have continually emphasized, however, "the point is not to discourage marginalized 'Basic Writers' from functioning within academic discourses, but rather to teach them how to preserve their multiple, even conflicting social roles while doing so" (54).

Implementing ideas about the contact zone and mestiza consciousness can help students to engage with the conventions of academic writing without submitting themselves entirely to the process of acculturation. The haphazard tutoring approaches I followed with Emma and Alison illustrate the need for writing center tutors to fully understand the consequences of their actions when dealing with underprepared students, and to best serve their particular needs by helping underprepared students function within the academic discourse while still maintaining their distinctive identities.

Alison: Difficulties in Practice

When I first met Alison, I was unsure how to approach the numerous difficulties in her paper, and it became increasingly apparent throughout the session that she lacked a background in academic writing. I was profoundly uncomfortable with the contradictions in Alison's writing style, which

seemed at first to be incomprehensible. My initial assessment of the session reveals this confusion and frustration:

> The client seems to have significant difficulties with writing. The paper has far too many issues to address in one short session at the end of my shift. Most prominent was her misuse of many verbs and nouns, and also nonstandard sentence structure. These two issues render many sentences incomprehensible without extremely close rereading and thinking about what she means to say rather than how the sentence reads.

However, as I later discovered, Alison's writing can be understood as a version of the academic discourse, its conventions blended with her own.

In *Lives on the Boundary,* Mike Rose recalls tutoring a similar client who "had an idea about how college writing should sound, and [who] was trying to approximate her assumptions" (171). My own experience from the session with Alison seems to echo Rose's experiences; many of my client's errors had similar sources, such as misapplied rules. The misused words and inflated vocabulary mark her errors as attempts to appropriate the foreign academic discourse.

In the tutoring session with Alison, I began by assessing her organization, and then I tried to focus the paper by addressing the assignment more explicitly, guiding the client in rewriting her topic sentences. Much of the paper consisted of summary rather than her analysis, so I worked with her to explicate points critical to fulfilling the assignment. It often seemed that her ideas and assessments were buried under her confused language, and simply needed to be drawn out. Interestingly, I inadvertently followed the guidance of Bawarshi and Pelkowski, by focusing on the text and looking closely at grammar. They cite this kind of surface change "as a springboard to discussing other types of academic standards." Such a discussion could have lent insight to the client regarding the standards of academic writing, helping Alison understand how her "subjectivity" is affected by the academic discourse (55). With my limited time, however, I focused my attention solely on correcting one sentence, hoping the student could follow the approach and make similar corrections to other sentences.

The most critically flawed sentence was Alison's thesis; it was extremely opaque, making it hard for the reader to understand the objectives of the paper. I recorded my approach to correcting her thesis in my session reflections:

> When we discussed her thesis, she was clear in what she wanted to express; however, she was unable to write down what she said, and spent over five minutes rephrasing the sentence without adding further explanation or content. I tried to intervene numerous times, but I eventually had to resort to giving her ideas rather than have her work for them.

I intervened by rephrasing my previous question about her thesis, but she was simply unable to write her thoughts on paper; she struggled for minutes on each word, only to end up with another unintelligible version of her original sentence. She seemed to focus for so long on each individual word that she forgot what she was writing the sentence about, necessitating more time to recollect her thoughts, only to repeat the struggle again with the next word. Out of desperation, I repeated what I remembered her saying previously, although the result was undoubtedly distorted—less Alison's own sentence than one influenced by my ideas of good writing.

My actions in the tutoring session reflect my failure to adopt a perspective of "critical consciousness," which I could then pass on to the client for future interactions with academic discourse. With Alison, the burden of acting as a translator in the contact zone was overwhelming in conjunction with my role as a tutor, to improve her as a writer working within the academic discourse. Her

difficulty in translating what she said into the style of academic discourse is indicative of a failure to maintain mestiza consciousness, an unfamiliar concept that I could have introduced to her. I should have explained to her that she need not acculturate herself, that she should maintain her ambiguous identity—as un underprepared student attempting to understand and appropriate academic discourse—instead of altering her writing to fit its precepts. Rather than explain these things to her, however, I corrected her approximation of academic discourse without explaining that academic discourse is just one standard—a style that can be maintained separately and independently—that does not have to dominate her identity.

Emma: Unintentional, Unconscious Success

Prior to my interaction with Alison, Emma came into the university writing center with an essay on African American poetry for a gateway class. Her professor had already graded the paper; Emma was seeking to revise her paper and turn it in again. Emma had great ideas, but the paper had significant sentence-level issues. As a peer tutor, I went line-by-line with my client, asking her to examine carefully sentences or words marked by her professor and to explain why the professor thought they were wrong. Emma did not recognize many of the sentence-level problems from reading aloud; she continued to read unless I stopped her and pointed out very specific issues that impeded comprehension. Whenever I asked her to explain something, she was very eloquent; I then asked her to write down what she had just said, which she later incorporated into the paper. For example, Emma rewrote the sentence "Although in a time where one's true self is fogged by society, it is however possible to overcome" as "It is however possible to overcome society's judgment of oneself." Occasionally, Emma was unable to offer a reason why her professor thought something was an error, and I would be forced to suggest a way to fix it so the session could continue. With my pointed suggestions, Emma's sentence "Son of a crossed breed, intermingle of white and black, uncertain of where death will claim him is left at a crossroad" became "As a son of an intermingling of white and black, he is left at a crossroad uncertain of where death will claim him." Throughout the session, Emma was extremely receptive to my suggestions, though it was disheartening that she did not understand many of her mistakes. I tried to take as much time as the session allowed to explain them, but I was unsure the results would last. I worked with her for about an hour, until my next scheduled client came; we finished without looking over her final paragraph, which I found unchanged when she sent me a copy of the revised draft she had handed in to her professor.

Emma's background presents an opportunity to understand how tutors can unintentionally acculturate underprepared students into academic discourse. Her first language is Creole, though this fact would not have been apparent without her self-disclosure in a later email. After she told me, the Haitian roots of the writing style became evident to me; however, when I first read her paper, the style simply seemed deficient. Emma said her teachers in high school focused on literary language and conventions like imagery and metaphors, but "here [at Georgetown], [literary analysis] is deeper and more profound: you have to read in between the lines and read passed [*sic*] the obvious and make an interpretation that others may not see right away" (Emma).

Her statement lends intriguing insight into the classification of writers. David Bartholomae believes better writers are distinguished by a key gesture: "the writer works against a conventional point of view" (152). Accordingly, Bartholomae could not classify Emma as a "basic writer," since she has incorporated this approach into her writing style. This is a striking example of how underprepared students can do exactly what professors ask, become acculturated of their own volition, yet

still have underdeveloped skills. Using his definition of a basic writer, Bruffee would suggest that Emma is not actually acculturated, since it is the lack of acculturation that defines a basic writer. Min-Zhan Lu characterizes Bruffee's alternate approach by setting "the goal of Basic Writing in terms of the students' acculturation into a new community" ("Conflict and Struggle" 894). Emma would fall under this definition of a basic writer because she has been underprepared for the academic discourse of college; however, like other underprepared students, she admirably confronts the challenge in her own way. Regardless of grammatical, structural, and other surface or superficial errors, the sophistication of her analysis is undeniably evident in her writing.

Her justification in our email conversation for the higher level of difficulty she experienced illuminates a common problem confronting underprepared students: it is much harder without pointed academic instruction to understand what to include in an essay. According to Emma, "being in college it is understandable that writing is more difficult because different professors ask for different things and always you have to try to write in the way they want it and write what they want to hear, and that in itself is hard too." Emma's difficulties with writing reflect reality, where instructions are not often explicit.

Yet even when her professor gave explicit instructions on what to revise, she did not fully understand her errors, nor how best to correct them. I was only partially successful in my role as a tutor, explaining errors and the necessary corrections to her. For the most part, I was able to question her and hear Emma explain her perspective, and then work through her own corrections by speaking aloud. Occasionally, she would be at a loss to explain her error, and rather than skip the issue out of concern for time, I dictated the correction if Emma was unable to come up with one herself. Though I had studied postcolonialism, I had not yet made the connection between it and my work in the writing center. I did not approach the session intending to implement an approach informed by critical or mestiza consciousness, but I never told her that her mistakes were "wrong," simply that they did not conform to the expectations of academic writing dictated by her professor. In this way, I allowed Emma to work within academic discourse by understanding it as just one standard out of many, meaning she was not necessarily deficient because of her background as an underprepared student. With this understanding, Emma can maintain her ambiguous identity—achieving mestiza consciousness. I unconsciously acted as a kind of translator for underprepared students like Emma in their initial contact with academic writing styles.

The Future of Postcolonial Thought in the Writing Center

Underprepared students like Emma and Alison can sustain the contradictions that comprise their identities—and thus manifest themselves in their writing—by viewing their personal ambiguity through this framework of the mestiza consciousness. For both Emma and Alison, critical consciousness—a "critical and self-reflective form of acculturation"—would allow them to understand the standards of academic writing on their own terms (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 42).

It is difficult to give a prescriptive method for incorporating postcolonial thought into tutoring while still allowing flexibility based on context and the individual; however, it is indefensible, even unethical, not to provide tutors with training in a postcolonial approach to peer tutoring. To that end, tutor training should incorporate a number of practical strategies, with an aim toward explaining academic discourse and its expectations—and allowing ambivalence about acculturation rather than unquestioning acceptance. In practice, this means changing how tutors explain errors, as well as academic discourse itself, when responding to the writing of underprepared students. Avoid absolute

"wrong" or "right" judgments—identify errors always as what is expected by professors in academic discourse. Emphasize that academic discourse is not necessarily the best or the ideal, but what is expected in the context of the American university. Couch explanations in terms of better understanding academic discourse and how to write within it. Through these methods, the writing center tutor can aid underprepared students by explaining academic discourse and improving their writing within that context—and thus help underprepared students maintain their unique identities by switching between discourses, rather than forcing a permanent choice.

Tutors can take advantage of the writing center's location as a contact zone to help underprepared writers understand that acculturation is not the only option; the tutor should help the underprepared student to understand academic discourse and explain that it is only one standard, that other discourses are not "wrong" in absolute terms. Underprepared students face numerous challenges when they enter college. An approach—marked by postcolonial thought, consciously and consistently applied by tutors in the writing center—to help underprepared students gain critical and mestiza consciousness can alleviate some of this burden, helping these students develop an ability to communicate using academic discourse without unintentionally forcing the students to acculturate themselves or reconsider their personal identities and perspectives.

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