

# Look Who's Talking!

## Gender Equality in Writing Center Consultations

Samantha Resnick | Pomona College

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This study adopts an empirical, linguistic approach to investigate the effect of writing-partner gender on writing-center consultation dynamics. Based on Deborah Tannen's solidarity vs. dominance theory and previous writing center scholarship, I expected to find unbalanced power dynamics in mixed-gender consultations and balanced power dynamics in same-gender consultations. However, a quantitative analysis of turn-taking from eight consultations shows no statistically significant difference between student and partner in either session scenario ( $p \geq 0.10$ ). Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of five linguistic metrics reveals that both types were generally of a collaborative nature. It is theorized that the emphasis placed on collaboration and non-directive partnering pedagogy in writing centers outweighs the gender differences found in speech in other contexts. This study thus has exciting implications for gender politics as the linguistic gender equality found in the collected corpus in some sense makes the writing center feminist rather than just feminized.

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"The soul has no gender."

Clarissa Pinkola Estes (qtd. in Johnson)

Amidst plush couches, impressive tea collections, and menageries of stuffed animals, writing centers are "communities of practice"—that is, unique places and groups of people in which students from all disciplines, levels, and backgrounds converge in a common desire to improve their writing (Geller 7). The one-on-one consultations offered are framed as conversations, with students and their writing partners sitting side-by-side and addressing specific concerns or strategies for improvement. ("Writing partner" is the Pomona College Writing Center's term for peer tutors, chosen to emphasize collaboration.) Since writing centers seek to serve diverse student bodies, scholars have focused on the intersectionality of identity—inclu-

ding race, class, and sexual orientation (e.g., Diab et al., Bielski, Rihn and Sloan, and Denny). In this study, I focus on gender, investigating whether it affects a student's participation and membership in this community of practice, both in individual consultations and the writing center as a whole. While recognizing gender is fluid and non-binary, this study, like many others, uses the male-female binary for the sake of simplicity. Specifically, this study investigates whether there is a change in the nature of the session's dynamic when a male partner is paired with a female student as compared to a female partner with a female student. Based on current scholarship in writing centers and linguistics, I hypothesized that a more collaborative, balanced consultation dynamic will occur in same-gender pairings as opposed to mixed-gender ones.

### ***Linguistics, Gender & Power***

Linguist Deborah Tannen has found gender-related trends in conversational speech participation. She correlates gender with status, with men historically perceived as higher status than women (290). She argues gender-as-status leads to the differentiation of female and male speech characteristics based on power versus solidarity. Discourses between speakers of different social statuses are defined by power whereas discourses between social equals are defined by solidarity (290). Male-female (mixed-gender) speech is thus aligned with power, with the lower-status female speaker assuming the subordinate role verbally. Conversely, female-female (same-gendered) speech associates more with solidarity, with the speakers as social equals. Tannen finds that mixed-gender interactions have higher levels of male participation because higher status members are seen as more powerful and thus more likely to participate by taking longer turns—on average, Tannen finds that men took up to four times longer than women during a given turn (220). Conversely, in same-gender speech contexts, free from the verbal domination of male speakers, a more comfortable and collaborative environment occurs that increases female participation (285).

While Tannen has found the above gender-related trends, much of her work is still contested due to her reliance on conversations without audio recordings, thus leaving open the possibility of mis-analyzed data, bias, or a reliance on stereotypes (Wright 3). Furthermore, other linguists have since empirically studied male versus female speech, but no clear consensus has formed in the field regarding whether gender-related speech differences exist (Eliassoph 2014).

There appears to be an empirical gap in

writing center studies regarding gender as well. Current scholarship focuses mostly on the role of stereotypes. For example, Gillespie and Olden dramatize the difference between female and male partnering styles, such as their claim that female partners place more importance on sugar-coating criticism than do male partners (14–15). However, theirs is a theoretical rather than empirical piece. Rafoth et al. contribute to this research through their examination of partner conceptions surrounding gender stereotypes, asking tutors to role-play four different mock consultation scenarios portraying what they termed as classic male or female behavior, underscoring that gender plays a role in consultations (3). While both these studies sought to illuminate the role of gender in the writing center, they reveal only *perceived* gender stereotypes without support from empirically examined real-time consultations. By contrast, O’Leary conducts an empirical study in a real-world context in which she examined a small sample of consultations between two female partners and their male and female students; she finds that the gender of the student did in fact impact the tutoring style adopted by the writing partner (69–70). However, she only examines writing partners attached to specific academic classes, for which they had already provided written feedback on student papers. Further, she investigates the effect of the student’s gender on the consultation dynamic, but not that of the tutor’s gender.

In terms of gender, an emphasis on stereotypes and empirical gaps seem to weave a common thread throughout linguistics and writing center scholarship. While both fields of scholarship are moving towards an understanding of gender that is flexible and situational (e.g., Coates 90; Denny 88), further empirical studies are needed. I seek to at

least partially fill this gap in both fields through an empirical study that doesn't rely on stereotypes. With regard to writing center scholarship, while O'Leary contributes important observations to the field, my study examines a new consultation dynamic by investigating consultations between students and random partners unattached to the students' specific classes. The observed consultations represent the first time the student and partner have worked together on that particular assignment—perhaps a more common scenario in writing center consultations. Secondly, the gender of the writing partner, not that of the student, represents the variable in my study. O'Leary examines female partners with male or female students whereas I examine male or female partners with female students only. With regard to the field of linguistics, I seek to contribute more empirical data to Tannen's theories of solidarity and dominance, in addition to clarity regarding whether gender differences exist in the first place. Lastly, this study will have important implications for social justice in that the results can spark further discussion regarding sexism through the lens of linguistics. Rihn, for example, identifies writing centers as ideal locations for these conversations due to the collaborative, peer-to-peer nature emphasized.

Overall, in these partnering scenarios, I hypothesized that gender would have an effect. As Tannen's theories might predict, in the absence of the power and status difference present in mixed-gender discourse pairings, female speakers might be more comfortable and more likely to speak when engaged in conversation with another female. Writing centers are places in which students and partners engage in a conversation about the student's work in a collaborative setting

(Blau et al. 18). Thus, I hypothesized that a more comfortable, collaborative, two-sided consultation dynamic will occur in same-gender pairings as opposed to an unbalanced, one-sided, partner-dominated dynamic in mixed-gender pairings. Limiting my investigation of gender and linguistics to a specific context—the writing center—restricts any claims I make regarding the gender performed by students to that context. I make no claim regarding, nor generalize my findings to, “female” or “male” speech as a whole as in past problematic linguistic studies.

## **Methods**

### ***Study Context***

All consultations took place at the Pomona College Writing Center in Fall 2016, hosted at Pomona College, a small liberal arts school in Southern California. Pomona's Writing Center is part of a larger trend in writing centers that emphasizes non-directive partnering pedagogy and a collaborative approach to consultations (Blau et al. 22). This is evident in both my personal experiences going through Pomona's writing partner training and the Center's declared mission. Our training emphasizes indirect language, collaboration with students, and, above all, ensuring that students retain ownership over their ideas. The Pomona Writing Center's website states:

The Writing Center offers students the opportunity to work on their writing by engaging in discussion with an experienced reader...you and your Partner will work collaboratively... Writing Partners, who are also Pomona College students, have experience and training to collaborate with students.

—Pomona College Writing Center

The repetition of the words “discussion” (1x) and “collaboration” (2x) emphasize the peer-to-peer atmosphere the Center strives to foster. The recent shift in name—from “writing fellow” to “writing partner”—further cements this focus. The word “partner” implies equals working together on a shared endeavor (in this case, discussing a paper), and the fact that writing partners are fellow undergraduate Pomona College students makes them literal peers—through a shared age group and student status—with those they help. Lastly, Pomona College writing partners come from all disciplines and fields of study. Students who sign up for appointments online, as all those in my study did, are paired randomly with writing partners, leading to all sorts of interesting mash-ups such as chemistry majors helping with anthropology papers and English majors working on biology lab reports. Random pairing de-emphasizes the authority of the partner even further, since the student is typically the subject matter expert.

### **Participants**

Fifteen undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 21 participated in my study. Seven were writing partners and eight were students seeking help on their respective assignments. All partners had at least one year of experience and were randomly selected based on my schedule availability in an attempt to prevent individual personality characteristics from skewing results. However, due to scheduling restrictions and the small number of male staff, one of the male writing partners participated twice (just four of 29 partners that semester were male). All participants signed consent forms prior to their participation, in accordance with the project’s IRB approval.

### **Procedure**

I observed eight individual consultations between writing partners and students—four same-gender pairings (female partner, female student) and four mixed-gender pairings (male partner, female student). The writing partner and the student had not met regarding that specific assignment previously. (All participants had been to Pomona College’s Writing Center at least once before. One participant had met with the same writing partner before, but regarding a different assignment.) While sessions at Pomona College are typically 50 minutes, those I observed lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. A post-consultation written survey was administered to the student participants regarding their comfort level with the partner and their preference for partner gender (n=8). The consultations were audio-recorded without the researcher present in order to maintain the appearance of a “normal” consultation. An online transcription company transcribed these recordings.

I analyzed transcripts for markers of collaboration such as amount of turns taken and indirect speech. (A new “turn” was counted every time the speaker changed in the transcript. Stand-alone non-lexical conversation utterances, such as when one person responded just with “mhmm,” were counted in the transcription as a turn.) I performed t-tests to compare student and partner turn-taking, using a 90 percent confidence interval because the sample size is small and the study is exploratory (Cohen 155). After collecting session observations during the Fall 2016 semester, I wanted more data on student gender preferences. Therefore, at the start of the Spring 2017 semester, I added a question to the online exit survey all students who visit the Writing

Center are asked to take, and I analyze those results below (n=407). See Appendix A for both sets of survey questions.

### Results and Discussion

Based on the current scholarly research in writing center studies and linguistics, I hypothesized that there would be a difference in observed writing center consultation dynamics due to the gender of the partner. A

collaborative dynamic entails that both the student and partner play active roles in a balanced consultation, as opposed to the partner dominating the conversation in an unbalanced consultation (Blau et al. 22). I expected to find unbalanced power dynamics in mixed-gender consultations and balanced power dynamics in same-gender consultations (see table 1).

Table 1  
**Expected vs. Observed Consultation Dynamics**

|                                   | Expected   | Observed   |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Same-gender Consultations</b>  | Equal turn-taking due to collaborative speech dynamic expected of same-gender speech interactions.       | As expected.                                     |
| <b>Mixed-gender Consultations</b> | Higher male turn-taking due to status and power difference expected of mixed-gender speech interactions. | Identical to observed same-gender consultations. |

However, contrary to O’Leary’s study and my own hypothesis, my results indicate gender did not affect the consultation dynamic: collaboration was found across the board. A near-equal amount of turns were taken by the student and partner in both same-gender

and mixed-gender consultation scenarios (see table 2). No statistically significant difference in turn-taking exists between student and partner in either mixed-gender and same-gender sessions ( $p \geq 0.10$ ).

Table 2  
**Number of Turns**

| M/F Session No. | Student                     | Partner |  | F/F Session No. | Student                     | Partner |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------|--|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------|
| <b>1</b>        | 99                          | 99      |  | <b>1</b>        | 77                          | 78      |
| <b>2</b>        | 95                          | 98      |  | <b>2</b>        | 128                         | 130     |
| <b>3</b>        | 145                         | 145     |  | <b>3</b>        | 278                         | 270     |
| <b>4</b>        | 172                         | 167     |  | <b>4</b>        | 200                         | 203     |
| $p \geq 0.10$   | Avg. difference: 2.25 turns |         |  | $p \geq 0.10$   | Avg. difference: 3.50 turns |         |

Further, in the follow-up written survey of session participants, 86 percent of students indicated “no preference” for the gender of their partner (n=8). When students were given space to explain their answer, these responses were typical:

- S1: It doesn't make a difference whether my Partner is male or female to me personally.
- S2: It's how smart they are, not their gender.
- S3: Both can provide excellent feedback!
- S4: The quality of service is more important than gender.

Students therefore either didn't see gender as a concern (S1) or, with gender playing less of an important role as my study has shown, students prioritize the partner's *abilities* rather than gender (S2, S3, S4). In the online exit survey later administered to all students, results are similar: 85 percent responded that they had no preference (n=407).

Furthermore, the majority of students whose sessions were recorded reported feeling comfortable during the consultation. On average, students in both mixed-gender and same-gender consultations all ranked their comfort level engaging, sharing ideas, and disagreeing with the partner at equal to or above 4 on a scale of 1 (uncomfortable) to 5 (comfortable) (see table 3).

**Table 3**  
**Survey Results from Recorded Sessions**

|     | Disagreement | Engagement | Sharing ideas |
|-----|--------------|------------|---------------|
| M/F | 5/5          | 4.75/5     | 5/5           |
| F/F | 4/5          | 5/5        | 5/5           |

Scale = 1–5; (1= uncomfortable, 5= comfortable)

A variety of observed factors contributed to the creation of the collaborative nature found in both types of partnering scenarios. I assess five different linguistic metrics: Indirect Advice, Trailing Thoughts, Recursive References, Authority Transfer, and Relatability.

**Indirect Advice**

“Indirect” and “direct” are linguistic terms used to describe the manner in which a speaker tries to accomplish a goal. In the case of the observed consultations, writing partners used indirect language to weaken or soften their advice in order to avoid

directly ordering the student to alter something. The following are two characteristic examples of this trend:

**Female Partner (FP):** I feel like it might be helpful for you to define what “maximum benefit of the test” is.

**Male Partner (MP):** “In that” is a little bit weird...slightly vague. It's a loose connection. It can be fine. That's just my sense of that.

The female partner highlighted the lack of clarification with the student's phrase. Her

goal would be for the student to define the term. The direct version of accomplishing this goal would be the command: “Define this term.” However, the partner instead framed it indirectly as a suggestion. The male partner stated his perceived problem—the weirdness of the student’s phrasing. His goal would be for the student to clarify or reword the statement. However, he never explicitly stated that the student should change it by saying something like, “You should change this wording.” The specific diction of these partners softened their advice into indirect rather than direct language. The statements “I feel” and “my sense” frame the partners’ advice as a personal opinion, not a fact that student must follow. “Might be” implied the female partner’s advice isn’t necessarily the right answer, thus also making the statement seem less like a fact. The word “just” weakens the male partner’s advice by acting as a trivializing force that diminishes the importance of his statement. In all consultations, partners repeatedly used statements such as: “I guess,” “I think,” and “My instinct is,” among other weak phrases like “This probably isn’t important, but.” All of this contributes to the transformation of the direct version of the advice *could have* taken into the indirect, weaker version the partners *actually* used.

The mitigation of the strength of the partners’ statements—in other words, their indirect language—undercuts the conception of the partner as an authoritative, omniscient “writing expert” whose word is law. Since the partner is already in a position of power as a trained professional being sought out for advice by the student, the de-emphasis of this power through the weakening of advice contributes to a more balanced consultation power dynamic

between partner and student. From a pragmatic standpoint, the use of indirect language also serves a social purpose by saving both participants what linguists term “face” (Mackiewicz 116). Face refers to both one’s desire for autonomy (“negative face”) and one’s desire to be liked by others (“positive face”). Framing advice as suggestions, which softens the criticism, reduces the threat to the student’s negative face (116). An order, on the other hand, would simultaneously threaten a student’s negative face *and* the positive face of the partner (who doesn’t want to appear bossy). Thus, the use of weakened advice, through indirect language rather than direct orders, nurtures a consultation that resembles a dialogue between equals rather than one authoritative “writing expert” and their student.

### ***Trailing Thoughts***

Frequently, the writing partners ended their turn on a trailing thought. This occurred in both male and female consultations. The following are two typical examples:

**FP:** She starts very small, and then it feels like...

**Student (S):** Kind of vague.

**FP:** Yeah. It starts becoming...this is her, and this is her husband.

**MP:** What’s the basic meaning of the sentence? He’s using cultural things to...

**S:** He’s using actions of the Greeks during the second crusade to justify his plundering in the Greek territory.

Intentionality aside, the trailing thoughts acted as an invitation for the other person to respond and finish the sentence. This creates

collaboration because the listener, in being pulled into the conversation, quite literally becomes an active speaker and participant rather than just an observer. In discourse analysis, trailing thoughts can be seen as a type of “transition relevance place”—in other words, a natural place for the hearer to take a “turn” speaking (Selting 477). By giving space for the student to speak, trailing thoughts thus make the consultation a more two-sided conversation involving the partner and student rather than just a one-sided monologue by the partner.

### **Recursive References**

This study regards recursive language as repeated reference back to previous points in a consultation conversation, or what linguists term “meta-language utterances” (Guillermo Carbonell 3). Recursion was observed when writing partners used phrases such as “Like you said earlier” in reference to past thoughts from the student. Partners used this type of language when summarizing ideas to help provide the student with clarification or re-focusing the student’s attention on a previous thought they believed would be useful to revisit. Two typical examples follow:

**MP:** Totally. I’m just trying to think because disconnect, disjunction you said at one point.

**FP:** Okay. Yeah. Okay so basically what you’re trying to say, these two powerhouses, they’re not completely unapproachable. You know they have their flaws.

In the male consultation, the partner redirected the student to one of their previous thoughts abandoned earlier in the conver-

sation by saying “You said at one point.” This shift eventually led to a breakthrough about the essay. In the female consultation, the partner summarized for a student that had been getting confused and disoriented up until this point by saying “what you’re trying to say [is].” This gave the student a clearer idea of their argument and allowed them to make progress in the rest of the session.

Beyond giving the student a literal verbal presence as “you” in the partner’s speech, these recursive references helped retain the student’s ownership of their ideas. By directly referencing the student and their previous ideas, the partner illustrated that they are merely building off of the *student’s thoughts* rather than positing their own. Furthermore, the recursive references literally implied that the student spoke at some point and therefore must have been an active participant. Hence, these meta-language utterances mark that a two-sided conversation, between two active participants, took place.

### **Authority Transfer**

From the onset of their sessions, students are given a choice when the partners ask what the students want to focus on specifically. This gives the student the power to shape and control the direction of the session, in which the partner focuses on what the student *wants* (student in control) rather than what the partner thinks the student *needs* (partner in control). It also occurs in the beginning when the partner and student must decide how to approach the paper. The manner in which this female partner dealt with this was characteristic of nearly all the sessions: “Okay, so do you want me to read it? Do you want to read it together? I guess, what works for you?”



Beyond just giving students the power-of-choice, in both session types partners asked the student for permission before proceeding, as seen in the two examples below.

**FP:** Do you mind if I read it?

**S:** No, you can read it. That's why I brought it here.

**MP:** Totally. That makes sense. Can I ask you a question of how you're going to talk about this disconnect?

Such statements are both a sign of respect for the student's authority and a transferring of power from partner to student, because each further allowed a student to control the session's direction. This connects back to the linguistic idea of "negative face." By asking permission, the partner is appealing to the student's desire for autonomy, in this case measured by the power of choice. The ability to say "yes" or "no" to the partner makes the student a more active member, the partner less authoritative-like—and ultimately a more balanced power dynamic.

Partners' asking for permission affirms an understanding that ultimately students control the flow of the consultation. This respect for the students' wishes, and granting students "the last say," was exemplified when writing partners and students disagreed to varying levels of extremity (depending on the amount the tutor attempted to exert their will or the amount of tension created). An example of a minor disagreement occurred in one female partner's consultation. When discussing an ancient Egyptian queen at the focal point of the student's paper, the partner suggested using the word "domesticating." However,

the student did not seem to like the word and continued to brainstorm others. The partner quickly moved on, saying, "Maybe not...I don't know, less domestic...Sorry I used that word." The insertion of the apology further illustrates a desire to honor the student's ideas.

One moment stood out as at a slightly higher level of disagreement between a male partner and a student who had, throughout the consultation, been resisting his suggestions. The student had set the focus from the beginning on sentence-level structure and word choice. The partner at one point pointed out an ambiguous pronoun and suggested replacing it with the specific noun. The student, however, said that it would be too repetitive and that the partner's suggestion "makes absolutely no sense." While this was more clearly a point of tension than the "domesticating" example, the partner did not try to push his view and instead said, "If you think it's clear, then you should leave it...It's your call." The partner thus explicitly stated that the student had the final say and ultimate power even though the partner himself did not seem to share the student's viewpoint. Here, while the partner and student didn't necessarily reach agreement, the session still fit in with the others because the student retained power rather than the male partner dominating. This is illustrated by the fact that the partner, while not in agreement completely, still respected the student's "negative face" by giving them the ultimate say in the consultation.

### ***Relatability***

The consultations were further established as mutual conversations between peers through moments of relatability

—when the partner and student commiserated over a common writing struggle or difficulty. The following are two examples:

S: Cool. I'll be back. Also I'm kind of scared of big paragraphs so if something like...if a separate paragraph doesn't make sense, could you point it out to me?

FP: I think that's a good instinct to have because...I often write these monster page and a half long paragraphs and I'm like, oh my goodness, my poor reader.

S: The papers were weird, because they were so specific.

MP: Yeah. Those are really hard. The class is awesome...those papers were hard.

S: Yeah. So hard.

In both of these examples, the student and the partner shared and related over a common struggle. For the female partner, it was the difficulty of deciding where to split paragraphs up, while for the male partner it was agreeing over the difficulty level of a class they shared. Commiserating over a writing difficulty with the student distanced the partner from the conception of them as some all-knowing writing expert who never struggles. This de-emphasis of the partner's authority, through making them seem like a peer with the same struggles, further balanced out the power in the consultation by putting the partner and the student on the same level. This is both an act of reassurance for the student and yet another contribution to the collaborative atmosphere of the session, where both student and partner struggle *together* through the same issues (Lunsford 8–9; Blau et al. 22).

### **Outlier**

While all of the above areas showcase equal power dynamics across the board in both mixed and same-gender consultations, there was one outlier—a mixed-gender session—that followed the pattern I hypothesized. Even though a near equal amount of turns were taken between the student and partner, a closer qualitative analysis—such as has been done above in various categories—revealed a very unequal dynamic between the partner and the student.

In this consultation, the student stated that she didn't know how to go about fixing various parts of the paper. Whereas in the other sessions the partners used non-directive tutoring strategies to tease out of the student a way of “figuring [it] out,” in this session the partner explicitly told the student the problems with her paper and how to fix them without trying to have the student figure it out for herself. The partner led the student through his logic, stopping at various points to ask, “Do you agree?” but only in order to lead her to understand he is right. Thus, she is more of a passive listener than an active participant. For example, he explicitly told her: “This is not your primary thesis...the job of this first paragraph is to explain what justice is...You'd be like, ‘Socrates is on the stand and he says that because he's poor he doesn't...’ [...] That's how your paper's going to work.” These explicit, direct instructions jeopardized the student's ownership over her ideas, since it was not a collaborative effort but rather a process dominated by the partner.

Further, when the student expressed her uncertainty about the introduction, stating, “I wasn't sure what to put for an intro. Could I just start it off with like...”, the partner shut her question down by interrupting with,

“Introductions are stupid.” The partner expresses this sentiment as a fact, not a personal opinion as the other partners did with indirect language and “I” statements. When the student again tried to ask a question—“Okay...so I shouldn’t...”—the partner once again did not let her finish and interrupted to state, “Just start there,” in reference to a previous point he made. The dominance of the male partner evidenced here shows a one-sided, unbalanced conversation rather than the collaborative nature observed in all the other sessions. As will be discussed in the conclusion, a study with a larger sample size would be needed to confirm this type of dominating discussion between male partners and female students is in fact an outlier and not the norm.

### **Analysis**

As shown by all of the collaboration metrics, rather than a consultation dominated by the partner, all except one of the observed sessions exhibited a collaborative conversation wherein both partner and student were active participants. Tannen’s emphasis on context might explain why my original hypothesis was not supported. She argues that her concepts of dominance and solidarity are overall patterns that may be affected by specific situations (645). I believe that writing centers, and specifically Pomona’s, might be one such context that mitigates the expected effect of gender on verbal discourse. Writing centers typically strive to create a culture that de-emphasizes tutor power and authority in favor of collaboration within consultations. While partners are the “writing experts” and thus inherently hold a position of power, this expertise is often obscured through non-directive partnering pedagogy and strategies such as those

observed in my study (Blau et al. 22). Between the absence of grades and the presence of unlimited coffee, centers differentiate themselves from classrooms as comfortable places for students to meet with peers for collaborative help on assignments (Blau et al. 18; Lunsford 8–9). Pomona College’s Writing Center is no exception to this larger trend, which probably explains the unexpected results of my study. I expected a difference based on the partner’s gender because of the different conversation dynamics (power vs. collaboration) associated with mixed- versus same-gender speech. Namely, I thought the power difference characteristic of mixed-gender speech would be present in mixed-gender consultations as well. However, the philosophy of the writing center which I studied encourages the replacement of power with collaboration, thus leading male-female speech to resemble the female-female speech dynamic observed in the majority of sessions.

### **Conclusion**

This collaborative and supportive environment has led writing centers to be regarded as a feminized space, described with words such as “motherly” and “nurturing” (Rihn par. 2). The partner-as-midwife has also become a common metaphor to describe writing center work, where the partner (midwife) aids the student (mother) in the birth of their paper (DeLappe 2). While DeLappe highlights the many benefits of applying this method, the association of femininity and midwifery encourages the feminization of writing centers. While feminization in itself is not negative, the presence of sexism in society can result in the association of negative stereotypes with writing centers and their workers (Rihn par. 3).

Rihn instead argues for a shift in the

description of writing centers from feminized to feminist, arguing that the center can become a place of active social justice by both addressing sexism in student papers and understanding the role of writing centers in the larger context of gendered politics. Hunzer also argues the writing center can be feminist in the sense that tutors can help make students “more aware of the detrimental effects of basing judgments and behaviors on [gender] stereotypes” (10). (See also Denny, especially chapter four.)

I argue that my study reveals a new, linguistics-focused way in which a writing center can be considered feminist. While wary of over-simplification, for my purposes I define feminism in the writing center specifically as equal power dynamics between partner and student, regardless of gender. My results indicate that female students were usually equally active participants with both male and female partners. By de-emphasizing power, the status difference normally expected in verbal mixed-gender speech was mitigated in the consultations, thus leading to gender equality within this specific verbal context. Gender became less of an important factor, at least linguistically, since the same speech dynamic, one resembling same-gender speech, is created regardless of the partner’s gender. This may explain the online exit survey results, in which 85 percent of students responded that they had no preference for the gender of their partner. The student participants in the post-consultation written survey instead cited “how smart [the writing partners] are” and the “quality of service” as more important than gender. The writing center, at least verbally, thus becomes not just feminized, but *feminist*, in the sense that both quality

and collaboration were more important than gender. Moreover, the Writing Center becomes feminist in that value is placed on a collaborative, solidarity-centered way of speech—the same style that Tannen associates with women. The fact that both male and female tutors are speaking in this typically female-associated way represents a departure from the practice of associating speech with biological sex. Instead, this study suggests that the unique, collaboration-focused culture of the writing center is what shapes the language used by tutors, regardless of their gender. These results were only seen through a close examination of speech in a specific discourse context, thus demonstrating that linguistics-based discourse analysis can be a valuable methodological tool for examining gender differences (or lack thereof) empirically in further writing center studies.

This study also suggests important implications for tutor training. The feminist writing center argued for by Rihn would require *feminist tutors* to populate it. Although my results indicated no gender differences in consultation speech, that doesn’t mean gender doesn’t play a role in the lives of tutors and the students with whom they work. As Rihn stresses, the writing center represents an ideal microcosm in which to discuss broader themes, such as sexism, that exist in the world beyond the writing center doors. Therefore, it is vital to hold these discussions in tutor training in order to raise the awareness of the tutors, both in terms of their own language use with peers during consultations, and for giving tutors the skills to navigate what can be quite difficult conversations regarding gender. As Miley argues, tutors must be “‘raised’ to have feminist values...

[where] listening, reflection, and collaboration are nurtured” if the writing center is to continue to take on a social justice role (22), as advocated by many scholars (e.g. Denny, Diab et al., Bielski, Rihn and Sloan). Many writing centers are already focusing on this social justice perspective, as “writing center administrators often advocate for teaching values indicative of feminist values” to their tutors (Miley 22). My study merely demonstrates that linguistics can further open up these feminist-minded conversations by focusing on speech and gender within the Writing Center specifically.

The outcomes of this study are exciting in terms of gender politics; however, further research is necessary to both confirm the results and explore other implications. There are a series of ways in which I plan on expanding my study. For example, the two outliers—the male-dominated session and a female student that indicated a preference for female writing partners—require a larger sample size in order to confirm they are indeed outliers and not the norm. However, the fact that 14 percent of students in the online exit survey indicated a gender preference might mean students should be able to request a writing partner based on gender (Hunzer 10). Further, I would like to explore the fluidity of gender by opening the study up to non-binary identifying students and writing partners. Third, my analysis has not so far examined other potentially gendered discourse behaviors such as the prevalence of apology and interruption. Further study

might demonstrate the gender-biased discourse in such areas even as the overall results show collaborative discourse regardless of gender. Lastly, my study focused on female students only. However, the feminization of writing centers might be an explanation for the small number of male students that utilize writing centers as a whole, including at Pomona College. (During the 2016–17 academic year, of the 1,234 Pomona College students who took the online exit survey, 421 identified as male [34 percent], 781 as female [63 percent], 20 as non-binary [1.6 percent] and 12 as other [1 percent].) If this is verified with further studies and male students are in fact being excluded or self-excluding, it would be an important implication to consider since writing centers seek to serve the *entire student population* and not just one subgroup (e.g., Tipper 33; Leit et al. 8; Salem 147). Therefore, the effect of the writing partner’s gender on male students could also be a site for further exploration.

Even the existing study, though, offers valuable insights into the application of linguistic theories of male and female discourse to writing centers. It ultimately suggests ways that gender equality seems to be achieved between male writing partners and female students, as well as between female partners and female students. Clarissa Pinkola Estes states, “The soul has no gender” (Johnson 7). Perhaps writing center consultations don’t have to, either.

## Appendix A

### **Written Post-Consultation Survey**

Administered by researcher after recorded consultations, fall 2016.

1. During this consultation, I felt \_\_\_\_ talking / engaging with the Writing Partner  
(1 = uncomfortable, 5 = comfortable)
2. During this consultation, I felt \_\_\_\_ sharing my ideas  
(1 = uncomfortable, 5 = comfortable)
3. During this consultation, I felt \_\_\_\_ disagreeing with the Writing Partner  
(1 = uncomfortable, 5 = comfortable)
4. Would / do you prefer working with a Writing Partner of \_\_\_\_\_ gender?  
(male, female, please explain why)
5. Additional comments.

### **Online Exit Survey**

Administered by all writing partners after all consultations, spring 2017

1. Do you have a preference for the gender of your Writing Partner?  
(Yes, I prefer to work with a male Writing Partner; Yes, I prefer to work with a female Writing Partner; I have no preference; Other)

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