A WRITING FELLOW'S PERSPECTIVE

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The distinction between a writer and writing fellow in a writing tutorial is a social construct based on hierarchy and authority. Writers internalize the idea that a writing fellow knows more about the writer's writing than the writer himself. In his haste to improve his writing, he erroneously attributes superhuman powers to the writing fellow, expecting her to be able to unravel incoherent paragraphs in a single bound and to defeat the "messy" thinking at every turn. Upon entering the writing center, the mindset of the writer suddenly becomes malleable to the writing fellow. The writer anxiously awaits instructions on what and how to write. Somehow the writer thinks that the writing fellow has knowledge that is forbidden to the writer (Felman 31). In response, the writer relinquishes control over his writing, choosing instead to doggedly follow the standards of the writing fellow; what is good writing to the writing fellow now becomes what the writer must write.

In this article, I suggest a new paradigm, premised on dialogue, for the writing fellow-tutor relationship. Neither the writing fellow nor the writer alone can gain critical knowledge of the writer's writing. It is only when writer and writing fellow engage in dialogue that the knowledge of the "unwritten" and the "unspoken" within the writing is discovered. Dialogue can negotiate the individual prejudices that dictate the standards of good writing by assessing both points of view in terms of knowledge rather than authority. Thus, dialogue enables the writing conference to become a collaborative and mutually informative experience between two *writers*. As I will illustrate through a case study of my tutorials with Mariel, a first-year writer, dialogue allows the writer to gain knowledge that was previously inaccessible to her, destroys the myth of the "perfect" writer, and enables the continuing development of the writer.

The Dominant Paradigm: Writer as Subordinate to Writing Fellow

As Nancy Grimm argues, the highly visible hierarchy within the Writing Center imposes the fixed idea of "good writing" unto the tutee and demands that only those specially trained and equipped in writing, i.e., writing tutors, can access the unexpressed thoughts within the writer's writing and in turn, within the writer's psyche. Such an assumption proposes that the writing fellow knows more about the writer's writing than the writer. Hierarchy and accepted authority distort the writing fellow's purpose as "fixing" the writer's text, leaving the writer estranged from her own thoughts.

Thus, in order to empower the writer, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner posit that writing fellows "ask questions about and react as readers to what writers have already written or are thinking of writing. In these ways, writers 'own' their texts, and writing center workers respect this ownership just as we would want it for ourselves" (22). To own one's writing is to assert one's individuality through the writing. However, the "student-text-tutor" relationship complicates the exchange of information between the writing fellow and the writer: what the writing fellow is understood to know about the

writer's writing and what the writing fellow thinks she knows are two separate and frustratingly fragmented pieces of knowledge.

According to Emily Smith and Louise Meyer, the writing fellow is the "seeing self," "a stand-in for the writer's other self only insofar as he questions or summarizes what the writer has generated" (34). Furthermore, such a "self" allows the writer to do something she would not ordinarily do, offering "an opportunity to reflect on what she has said so far" (34). The "seeing self" is informative in theory: the writing fellow acts as a "sounding board" to the writer, questioning the writer's thoughts and ideas in order to become better informed of what the writer is and is not saying. It is tempting to theorize that the writer's difficulties are fueled by the absence of her "monitoring self" and that a writing tutor can act as that self for her (Smith and Meyer 28). However, it is this view of the writing fellow as the "seeing self" that often drives the common writing center practice of directive tutoring. Directive tutoring can be defined as any practice that violates the writer's right to choose and violates the writer's individuality. Steve Sherwood argues that directive tutoring may even infringe upon the freedom of speech, the most fundamental right of writers (56-57).

Thus, the "seeing self" role of the writing fellow inevitably compromises the "writer's right to choose." The writing fellow is inescapably partial and restricted to her own views of what the writer is and is not saying. A person such as this could never be a "self" for another writer. No matter how objective the writing fellow remains, his filter comprises his subjective experience of what is being heard. We cannot discount the fact that writing fellows are writers too. The idea of the writing fellow as the "stand-in" for the writer betrays the complexity inherent within each person's writing process and writing. The writing conference is not a point along a line whose trajectory represents that person's writing process. Rather, the conference allows the writer to see her writing process as a continuing evolution of many different lines of reasoning, none of which by itself is representative of the whole. Such visibility is important—it is this very conventional image of the linear, uniform process of writing that suppresses the writer's voice. One's writing process need not conform to a single trajectory; it may be "messy" and wholly incomprehensible for another person. In addition, one's writing process need not conform to a single person's point of view; it can be amalgam of views, as constructed by the writer. Thus, it is when operating with this idea of the writer and the writing process that the writer will be able to make visible for his reader and for himself that which is left unspoken in *his* paper.

Dialogue

The acquisition of self-knowledge requires dialogue. Shoshana Felman, a psychoanalyst, helps to explain the intersection of knowledge and dialogue as experienced by two "remote" and unfamiliar-with-each-other thinkers, in this case the writing fellow and the writer. Felman's definition of dialogue considers the origin of thought, the expression of ideas, and the ultimate gains from this unique human interaction. When applied to the writing tutorial, the "origin of thought" comes from the writer, but the effective expression of ideas and the mutual gains experienced in dialogue are the effects of a collaborative partnership. Dialogue then, requires equality between the writer and the writing fellow—a mutual "ignorance" (33). This mutual ignorance represents a compromise between the writer and the writing fellow that neither person's idea of "good writing" be the centerpiece for the writing confer-

ence. In this way, directive tutoring becomes non-directive.

Furthermore, Felman states that "ignorance becomes structurally informative" (33). Indeed, it is only through the evaluation of one's ignorance that the writer gains critical knowledge of her writing—the how's and why's of what she wrote, resulting in the re-discovery and evaluation of the thought process behind it.

Such gains give the writer intellectual power and dissolve the social construct of the tutor-writer relationship. The writing fellow is replaced with a peer that the writer (tutee) can confront, challenge, and question. This new interaction is deemed by Felman as a mutual apprenticeship whereby the goal of "getting good writing" is set aside; instead, both writers become more invested with the how's and the why's of the other's point of view. In this manner, the tutee can evaluate the usefulness of his knowledge in terms of what it contributes to the writing and to the reader's understanding of his main ideas.

Specifically, the writer gains the knowledge of two essential unknowns—the writing unknowns and the spoken unknowns (Felman 32). Writing unknowns give visibility to what is not being said in writing so that it is easy for writer and writing fellow to evaluate cohesion of written thoughts. Spoken unknowns give writer and writing fellow visibility of what is not communicated in the conference. The quality of the knowledge gained highlights why dialogue is mutually informative and essential in helping the writer improve her writing.

Dialogue in the Writing Center: A Case Study

It is 9:00 pm when I meet Mariel, a student taking a required first-year English seminar entitled "Women and Culture," approximately one week before she has to hand in her final draft of her research paper. Her English class, like many other first-year classes at Columbia University, requires three conferences with a writing fellow (one conference per essay). I've met with Mariel before and recognize the "deer in the headlights" look of dread and anxiety. I recall her constant need to be reassured that she is writing the right things and explaining things the right way. I have come to anticipate her expressions of concern and eagerness for improvement.

By the time we sit down, I've read her paper thoroughly, marked up the margins with my comments, and thought of the topics we could discuss: thesis statements and dangling modifiers. As I sit down in front of Mariel, I try to fight the temptation to give her my version of her paper. I reflect on the writing center's purpose and aim: to give students a place to *talk* about their writing, not a place to edit their writing. And, indeed, there is so much I want to discuss with her about how she uses Lacan's and Freud's theories of the "mirror-stage" of identity and homosexuality to explain Ovid's depiction of Narcissus, but I do not know where to begin. I struggle to word my introductory question to this anxious writer because I do not know if she recognizes where I am coming from, that amidst the flurry of secondary sources and complicated sentences, I am lost. How can I convey to this writer that I see what she is trying to accomplish, yet I do not hear what she is trying to say? As we begin to speak to each other, I hear the voice of an inexperienced writer seeking to please her English professor and a voice seeking to please me.

My first question to Mariel is pretty simple: "Do you have anything you want to discuss?" She looks at her paper, filled with my pencil marks, comments, and questions and says, "I'm not too sure

about my thesis—it doesn't seem to fit well." Immediately I go into writing fellow mode, thinking of possible remedies for fixing her thesis statement, asking her to re-write it in two short sentences or to repeat it back to me. In both instances, Mariel is not getting to what I deem as a clear thesis statement. I continue to ask her to clarify points, provide evidence, and do something that she obviously neglected to do. I do not realize it immediately, but through these exchanges I am asking Mariel to say and write what I want her to; there is no Mariel present anymore, and my accepted authority as the writing fellow has dominated the construction of *her* paper.

As I continue to ask her "things you want to discuss" like thesis statements, grammar, style, etc., I begin to notice the subtle nuances of our roles as tutor and tutee instead of peers. I am talking too much about what I think about narcissism relative to Lacan and Freud and find myself directing this writer towards my interpretation of her text instead of her interpretation of her text and Lacan's and Freud's texts. My text becomes superimposed upon her text; as she listens intently, furiously jotting down my pearls of wisdom, I wonder if it is I who am really writing this paper and if she is just simply putting her name at the top. Not once does she interrupt me during this protracted monologue; she does not outwardly question what I say because she is too involved in assimilating it into her text. She occasionally looks up from her writing and says, "that makes sense," but then she returns to her hurried scribbling. I see Mariel writing, and I can hear myself speaking, but it is only in the moments in-between that I recognize the eerie silence of her unspoken agreement with my thoughts. It is then that I understand that she still does not know her paper. I am so involved and determined to help her create the "product," a cohesive eight-page research paper, that I've overlooked dialogue, and as a result, overlooked her individual writing process and her right to choose what to write.

It is only when I see her expressions of confusion that I remember a sage piece of advice from my training as a writing fellow: just let go. At this point I recognize that Mariel has not gained any insights into her own writing, only an accumulation of insecurities. Mariel grows increasingly hesitant to answer my questions. My presupposed knowledge of her weaknesses reveals my ignorance of what's not being said. It is within this context that Felman's conditions for dialogue and knowledge-making are ideal, for our mutual ignorance and constant active monitoring allow for an initial seed of knowledge to be planted in the garden of "that which we do not know" (Felman 33). It is from an initial condition of mutual not knowing that leads to a joint effort, through dialogue, to investigate and question more deeply the writer's text from both our perspectives. As Felman further explains,

> Knowledge, in other words, is not a *substance* but a structural dynamic: it is not contained by any individual but comes about out of the mutual apprenticeship between two partially unconscious speeches, which say more than they know. Dialogue is thus the radical condition of learning and of knowledge, the analytically constitutive condition through which ignorance becomes structurally informative. (33)

Recalling this definition, I ask her: "How do Lacan and Freud figure into this depiction of Narcissium by Ovid?" Mariel pauses; I can see her thinking of what to say and here, I too am thinking of what to say in response to her answer. Though we are silent for a few seconds, we are talking frantically within our minds. We are anticipating the other's response, engaged in this internal ebb and flow of ideas and struggling to navigate the waters of true knowledge and false reassurance.

Thus, within our dialogue with each other, I dialogue with myself as I listen to her explain. I am

engaged in my own thoughts in a manner similar to Mariel's. I, too, am playing advocate/devil's advocate by simultaneously challenging and defending my self-reasoned thoughts. My self-knowledge arises from an internal summation—the active monitoring of what I am still ignorant of (as a naïve reader) and what has been revealed to me within our dialogue.

The dialogue within a writing conference employs a currency of knowledge, not authority. There is no "perfect writer" in this conference, and indeed, there is no writing fellow. There are simply two writers engaged in ideas, participating in each other's thought process. If I had continued with my monologue of questions and pen marks, I suspect that Mariel would have returned to her room from the writing center thinking that she is a terrible writer and feeling confused about what she should write. She would likely then visit the Writing Center again and again, convinced that a writing tutor will be able to do something. She, like many students, would still see the writing center as a "fix-it" shop rather than a space for developing, not diluting, her involvement with her writing.

Thus, when Mariel speaks about her writing and ideas, I do not jump in to suggest a right way to express something or how to say X instead of Y. I simply summarize what Mariel has told me so far and repeat it back to her. It is when I repeat Mariel's idea of Narcissus as a homosexual that she becomes aware of the places within her text that I, as the reader, and that she, as the writer, cannot readily access. She explains that when Narcissus looks at his own reflection, he experiences a dissociative identity disorder and is not able to recognize his own face. She uses Freud and Lacan to provide a scientific basis for her conclusions and to provide two viewpoints on how and why identity can be misidentified. She clarifies her ideas in an effort to help me understand, and she is actively engaging with her previously unexamined thoughts.

Mariel now speaks with the assurance of being a writer and a legitimate thinker; she's become more involved with her essay and less concerned about what I think she *should* do. My own admission of being confused and not understanding the theories of Lacan and Freud as they're used in her paper allows her to recognize my ignorance of one specific idea within her text. She speaks to me, pausing occasionally to listen to herself explain and to consider the clarity and the relevance of the ideas she gives to me. I occasionally ask her questions like, "Why do you think Narcissus would fit Lacan's theory better than Freud's?" and "Does Narcissus fulfill either Lacan's or Freud's theories?" Throughout our discussion, she recognizes where she is losing me within her spoken text, and she takes steps to explain further, saying that Narcissus's mother sheltered him too much and that he failed to overcome what Lacan terms the "mirror stage" of identity development and develops, as Freud posits, a distorted version of self-love manifested in homosexuality. She then goes on to say that both the effects of the "mirror-stage" homosexuality can be seen here because Narcissus loves this man that he cannot recognize as himself. As she explains, I evaluate my knowledge of her text and try to think of more topics to explore to further the process of creation of her text. The very act of my explaining Freud's psychological theory and her justifying the reasons for including it helps both of us to see the "holes" or gaps in lines of reasoning.

Soon, Mariel is finished talking, and it is my turn to question her, yet again, in this dialogic mode. I wonder if our dynamic is fluid, constantly moving from one direction to another, from Mariel's thoughts to my own. I pose the questions or summarize her ideas and she re-evaluates them in our dialogue. But is it possible that such summaries follow an agenda in which I unconsciously lead Mariel

to become a "second Jen" even as I actively fight against it? I must confess in some instances this is true; I am not a blank intellectual slate but have opinions of her responses to my questions and of how well she formulates them. Thus, my responsibility is to present my and any "other" views in a non-judgmental manner for Mariel's consideration (Freed 22). But, again, the practice of dialogue gives the writer a choice to either accept or resist the ideas of the writing tutor. Dialogic tutoring is not an obligation set out by the writing tutor and followed by the writer but can be thought as the "choice to agree or disagree" tutoring.

Indeed, the writing center has re-centered tutoring as a function of discourse rather than as a mode of "hunt and peck," where the writing fellows edit both the writing and eventually, the writer. When the writer and the writing fellow engage in dialogue, there can be no hierarchical distinction between the two because such a distinction presents a paradox. That is, if the writing fellow is presumed to know more about the writer's writing than the writer herself, who then is the "authentic" writer? The truth is, the writer is a chimera—she is both an individual and a collaborator. One's writing is uniquely one's own; it only becomes cognitively rigorous when the writer is forced to evaluate her ideas in dialogic setting. This element of cognitive rigor—of explicit quantifying of what one does and does not know about one's writing—catalyzes the creation of new knowledge. In this way, writing fellows help to develop the student-as-writer rather than superficially changing the writing.

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