

SAFE HOUSES AND CONTACT ZONES: RECONSIDERING THE BASIC WRITING TUTORIAL

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In addition to conventional one-on-one tutoring, the University of Michigan-Flint writing center is involved in a second kind of tutorial with our basic writing program, English 109. Students in English 109 are generally unprepared for the writing tasks expected from the university. These students register for three credits of English 109 and meet with an instructor twice weekly in a classroom setting, which is supplemented with four hours spent in the writing center tutorial. Students work with the same tutor throughout the semester, creating a portfolio of writing that is specific to the writing center (that is, not the work done in the classroom component of English 109), which is then graded by the tutor, in conjunction with the center's manager and director. These students are what the discipline tends to call "basic writers."

I have spent five years as a writing tutor at the University of Michigan-Flint. There is an advantage to this longevity in that I have learned a great deal about writers and writing, and I have become comfortable with the ways and processes of tutoring that new tutors are still learning. The disadvantage is that while I have become comfortable in this space, I have also become, to an extent, complacent. This complacency manifests itself, at times, as both rigidity and authority—in the sense that I know how to do this, I know how it has always been done, and I am, therefore, the one who knows all about tutoring. Because I began to see these thoughts and behaviors affecting my tutorials, I started looking for new ways to approach the tutorial, particularly in the work that I do with basic writers.

One of the ideas that appealed was that of the contact zone—a place in which student and tutor could meet and clash; a space in which to try on language and form without the fear of failure that often accompanies these students, who are new to the formal expectations of academic discourse. In particular, I wanted an approach that would be applicable to those basic writers who come into the academy knowing intuitively, if not overtly, that they are underprepared for college writing. These are the students who often speak and write in a home dialect, and usually have little experience with the more formal language expected from the academy. My experience has shown that for these writers, the voice of the learned peer is of particular value. Our peerhood positions us somewhere between the voice of authority that is the classroom instructor and the more equal place of the peer responder who comes to a response group wary of making enemies. Our value in the tutorial comes from the fact that although we are students, we have gained some mastery of the conventions of formal writing.

Given that this learned peer status gives us some small authority, and given that I think it

is vitally important for new writers to understand the structural and linguistic expectations of this academic discourse they are choosing to learn, simply offering a safe place to try new moves and strategies isn't always enough. Instead, we need to demystify just what this language is, and one of the ways of doing this is through using a contact zone strategy.

Basic Writing at University of Michigan-Flint

At my university, students are placed into English 109 based on their performance on the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPX). WPX readers evaluate student essays based on certain criteria, including organization (how thoughts are organized around the central idea), coherence (the ability to smoothly connect thoughts from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph), development (ability to thoroughly explain an idea in writing), and control (ability to successfully manage the rules of basic written English).

Although our placement criteria are standard, definitions of basic writers are manifold and often in conflict. One of these is set out by Linda Stine, who argues that “[b]asic writing students [are] typically older, poorer, less apt to come from stable, highly educated families, and more apt to have learning disabilities” (51). This contrasts with Kenneth Bruffee’s description: “The common denominator among both the poorly prepared and the seemingly well-prepared [is] that . . . all these students seem to have difficulty adapting to the traditional or ‘normal’ conventions of the college classroom” (85). While my experience with basic writers in the 109 tutorial suggests that these are both true, neither seems wholly definitive. In my experience, the first is too narrow, the second too broad.

One of the advantages of being a tutor rather than a teacher is that the tutorial can engender a relationship that allows us to get to know our students’ histories and goals. What I have observed over time is that although each of these writers comes with unique skills and backgrounds, there are two primary camps. The first is made up of those who come from homes, often nontraditional, often working class, in which they are the first to graduate from high school, and don’t have family or peers who understand the drive toward higher education. The second is comprised of those who don’t want to attend college, but have families who have pushed them in this direction.

Not surprisingly, the challenges facing these writers are wildly divergent. The first group faces the difficulty of learning this new discourse without a place outside of the university to practice it. The second resists the discourse because they aren’t where they want to be—they need to be pushed toward this thing that they don’t really want, and their motivation for doing so is primarily external, meaning that the tutors who work with these students often face struggles simply getting them to try to write.

Regardless of a student’s goals and background, the primary goal of English 109 has traditionally been to give writers a space in which to practice writing. During the course of the semester, students generate a large quantity of writing, some of it in essay form, some in less

traditional academic forms. Because tutors work in small groups, we have the advantage of guiding each writer according to his or her needs. In this process, we have typically followed a fluid sequence of assignments in our 109 tutorials. We begin with what we call fluency—the act of simply getting the words onto the page, without focusing too narrowly on grammar, mechanics, or specific language issues. The reasoning is that if we can get our writers to just *write*, then we have opened one of the first channels of thinking in written language—a Peter Elbow concept that very often works in the tutorial.

Once we are convinced that our writers are capable and confident of putting thoughts on paper, we move into summarizing short stories or articles. From here, we progress to analysis, and somewhere in the mix we talk about thesis statements, textual support, and other features of good academic writing. Our primary argument for following this format is that each type of assignment builds on the previous so that by the end of the semester the student has created a portfolio of increasingly more complex writing.

The Basic Writing Tutorial as a Safe House

In our tutor-training seminar, we read and discuss composition and collaborative theory in preparation for the work we do with writers. At the time that I went through the training, our dominant pedagogical focus was on the process and practice of appointment tutoring. The ways and ideas of the 109 tutorial were handed down from mentor-tutor to new tutor in a predominantly oral tradition.

The focus, then, was on how we could make the writing center a safe space for practicing writing. The basic writing tutorial was process-focused and heavily reliant on a drawer full of writing prompts like “My Mother’s Kitchen,” which asked for lots and lots of detail about one’s mother’s kitchen. Descriptive assignments like this one would lead, eventually, to other, more complex writing tasks. In this kind of tutorial, it was the tutor’s primary responsibility to encourage writing, to point out positive aspects of the writing, and to foster a sense of success in her writers. I have often thought of myself as a cheerleader, motivating new and often cautious writers to keep trying new things as I avoided being particularly critical about what they had done before. Many, possibly even most, students tutored under this approach leave the center feeling that they have gained, if not a complete mastery of the writing process, at least a reduction in the panic they feel when faced with a new writing task.

Why, if this approach to tutoring seems to help many new writers, do I feel compelled to move away from it? The answer comes when I look at my notes from earlier tutorials and find that creating a strictly supportive environment can sometimes fail my writers. They may pick up some grammar skills, may learn to write an effective short essay, may gain some mastery of writing more complex texts, but more often than not, it seems to be a stopgap measure in that their fundamental thinking about writing, and particularly about the writing expectations of the university, still remains unchanged.

The potential weakness of a purely supportive approach, then, lies in its inability to get at some of the deeper issues that basic writers confront. Although many of these students face some larger, deeper challenges rooted in their socioeconomic and cognitive backgrounds, the ones that I, as a tutor, am most equipped to address are primarily superficial and related to language usage. These include limited linguistic acclimation to the institution, limited understanding of one's audience and that audience's expectations, and still-limited experience with formal written English. The latter particularly concerns me because there is the sense, often, that there is a particular educated discourse "that classifies non-standard dialects as incorrect and that positions non-standard speakers as not competent, uneducated, wrong, or even cognitively deficient" (Maxson 27). I begin to feel that in order to move toward larger academic expectations of competency we must move away from being merely supportive in the tutorial.

In truth, I struggle against my own inclinations. The literature of composition offers many debates about home dialect, particularly as it detracts from the acculturation of basic writers to the writing expectations of the university. Some compositionists, such as Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington, Jeffrey Maxson, Donald McCrary, and Mike Rose, make a compelling argument that expecting new writers to fully embrace this new academic dialect is tantamount to requiring that they remove themselves from the things that tie them to their homes and cultures—giving up the home dialect in favor of one that is more academic changes more than just the words we speak. It changes who we are.

From a purely rhetorical perspective, I embrace this idea, this understanding that unsophisticated writing does not equal unsophisticated thought. I have spent too many hours in too many tutorials with writers who could speak articulately and in depth about a subject which, when the pen is in hand, or the fingers are on the keyboard, escapes capture into written form. What these writers are keenly aware of, and what I, from my position as a tutor who has read many assignment sheets from many professors cannot ignore is that while this home dialect is all well and good, the inescapable expectation is that students will come into their history or biology or nursing class with the ability to write and speak and think in formalized, academic language.

The Basic Writing Tutorial as a Contact Zone

The contact zone, as Mary Louise Pratt defines it, is a place where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power." Its application in the classroom has been documented by compositionists such as Patricia Bizzell, Mark Williams and Gladys Garcia, and Jeffrey Maxson, each of whom notes the value of this approach in helping underprepared students find their place in and master the literacy of the contemporary academy. For Bizzell, the contact zone manifests itself in a Friereian push toward critical consciousness, while Williams's focus is more closely linked to breaking down the insider/outsider distinctions that lie in much of the discourse. For each, one of the unexpected con-

sequences of using the contact zone in the classroom has often been a challenging of authority and the notions of critical consciousness. As Maxson points out, “the contact zone can open up clashes between teacher and student cultures” (2).

Because contact zone pedagogy so clearly opens up lines of confrontation, I initially didn’t see its application to writing center practice. It was only after discovering Maxson’s approach of solicited oppositional discourse, or a modified variant of the contact zone, that I began to consider its application to the tutorial. In his “‘Government of da Peeps, for da Peeps, and by da Peeps’: Revisiting the Contact Zone,” Maxson suggests ways to make oppositional discourse less personal, thereby reducing the potential for confrontation. The benefits of this approach, he suggests, are first, that it allows basic writers to “tell the stories of their encounters with formal language and how they have or have not made places for themselves in settings where formal language is the norm” and second, that, as Pratt suggests, this approach creates a place where “language users [can] write (or talk) themselves into and through unfriendly language environments.” When we work with basic writers in the intensely personal tutorial, these are two things that we can do, and do well. We have the time and the involvement to listen even as we encourage and direct. My faculty advisor argues that good teachers will do the same, and while I know experientially that this is true, I suggest that the tutor-tutee relationship is different in that even the most involved teacher cannot develop the same close relationship that we can.

We have in this tutor-tutee relationship the unique advantage of being learned peers, rather than teachers. The “learned” distinction is an important one in that, as Muriel Harris points out, “[t]utors are supposed to be . . . better acquainted with the conventions of academic discourse . . . but the more skilled tutors are, the further they are from being peers in a collaborative relationship.” Although we are peers, we are seen by our writers as “knowledgeable insiders” despite our continuing struggles to master the language of the academy (379).

Like our basic writers, we still wrestle with academic language and “ways of knowing.” “Education,” as Bruffee insists, “properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of [an academic] conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to the conversation” (87). As tutors, we are learning to enter the conversation, and we consistently work toward this entrance by writing and talking about writing among ourselves and with other writers. Certainly, we tutors have gained more experience and have had more practice with the expectations of the academy. And because we are still working toward entrance into this knowledge community, we are positioned to help facilitate the basic writer’s transition into formalized language usage. We are close to the process.

Our academic literacy is one of the most important things tutors can share with our tutees. We have learned to speak the language(s) of the academy despite our divergent backgrounds, and because we speak and write the language, and because we work so closely with our writers, we have the ability, via peerhood, to impact the language choices of our writers.

Pratt visualizes a classroom that examines differences rather than marginalizes them, a place that is nonauthoritarian, in which students with different ideas, different languages, and different voices come together in often conflicting ways. Her argument is that by giving each voice “air,” collective, collaborative meaning can be made. Often the meaning may not be what the authoritarian teacher would choose or suggest or advocate, but it is meaning nonetheless, and therefore of value. Also, because these conversations lead to collective (socially constructed) meaning, participants in the conversation come away with a deeper understanding of those meanings. And if we are examining ways of making collective, socially constructed knowledge—as Bruffee tells us we must—then the collision course that can be the contact zone is one such place for this meaning making.

I first attempted this contact zone strategy during the winter of 2006—the same time that I began grappling with my own questions about the effectiveness of safe-house tutoring. As I was researching the ideas of academic languages and university expectations, my ideas began to take shape and become part of my practice. The advantage of winter is that it is a slow 109 semester, and I had only one student with whom I started discussing my research and my questions. I was fortunate in that she was amenable to trying new, potentially useless ideas, and that she was willing to openly discuss her ideas and reactions to these new assignments.

In this section, I will discuss how I approached the tutorial with this student, as well as how I have begun trying new kinds of writing assignments with my writers in fall 2006. This practice is evolving as I take what I am learning from the tutorials and constantly searching for ways to adapt new strategies.

From my early experience, I decided that there are three interrelated elements that should be addressed in the tutorial: playing with language, arguing about meaning, and trying on language from the outside. Much of my reading has pointed toward these elements, and because I am compelled to translate theory into practice, a series of different writing assignments was born.

In particular, I began by modeling an assignment created by Maxson in his basic writing classroom. Maxson asked his student to read and then translate into home dialects passages from well-known literature: the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*; Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech; Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address.” What the results of this assignment showed was that many of Maxson’s basic writers were wholly capable of understanding nuance and meaning, and adapting these “lofty” texts into familiar language.

In my tutorial, I asked the writer to read and translate a passage from compositionist Richard Fulkerson into everyday English. With a dictionary in hand and two hours to work on it, she ended the session by handing me a completed, readily accessible version of what was originally a heavily academic and jargon-laden text.

Taking the assignment a step further, I asked her to reverse the process with the lyrics to 50 Cent’s “That Ain’t Gangsta.” This, curiously, was both more difficult and wholly frustrating

for her. When we discussed it afterward, she explained that the first assignment was easy, that it was nothing more than “looking it up and understanding it.” When it came to working with what she classified as “her” language, elevating it to something readily understood by a reader unfamiliar with that language, it proved so difficult that she gave up. The why of this leads me to questions that I have not yet been able to answer, but which I think about as I keep working with students on this contact zone strategy.

In our discussions about language, particularly the issues of academic language, my tutee remarked once, “I need you to teach me to fake it. I don’t know how to write this stuff, but if I can learn to pretend to do it, I might get through.” For me, this was a turning point in that I had been thinking about the idea of fakery, suspecting that if we could show our writers how to fake this new dialect, it would eventually lead to familiarity, from familiarity to comfort, and thence ultimately to knowledge. It was David Bartholomae’s argument that we are expecting these new writers to speak with authority and in an unfamiliar language that had sent me in this direction—I wondered how we could have these expectations without handing over the proper tools to help writers meet them. This writer, then, gave me permission to work with her in this new direction, and this has informed much of my practice in this new semester.

To return to those ideas of playing with, arguing about, and trying on language, I began this semester by discussing the ways in which we use language, and the ways in which home and academic dialects differ. I had my writers start by defining “good writing” and then examine their own writing to determine whether it meets their criteria. From here, I asked if the way they talk in school is the same way they talk to their friends and family. The answers have been interesting.

According to one group, the features of good writing include good grammar, an interesting opening, and words that “flow.” When asked if their own writing includes these elements, most answered “no.” More tellingly, one answered, “I thought [my writing] was good, and I made good grades in high school English, but I don’t know what my teachers here want.” This points again to the need to demystify the expectations of academic writing.

The second part of my inquiry about if and how their school language is different than their home languages offered further insights. Each writer, when first asked if his or her language was different initially answered “no.” Upon further reflection and much hemming and hawing, most said, “Well, yeah. It’s a lot easier to talk to my friends. I’m not worried that they’ll think I’m stupid.” Many expressed frustration with the fact that they hadn’t yet learned to talk—and write—in the two different dialects.

Approaching this tutorial from the contact zone requires that I open a dialogue about code-shifting and academic expectations. It requires that I raise the specter of language changing the way we think and who we are. It also requires that I accept the protestations that academic discourse is boring and repetitive, and push forward regardless.

Lately, I’ve been having my writers create textbook entries because I think of textbooks as

student-centered examples of what academic discourse looks like. I begin by having my writers list the features of textbook entries, and their lists look like this: boring language, big words, index, study questions. We then pick a topic for each writer—something he or she knows something about—and then they begin crafting their entries, with the understanding that when they are complete, they will be distributed and others will write about that entry.

As they are writing, we are talking about why the language seems dry, about why sometimes one big word is more effective than a lot of small ones that don't quite hit at the meaning they want. They are writing with dictionaries in hand and with an ear to their future readers.

In this case, the writing becomes more than just writing for writing's sake; rather, it is an exercise in meaning making, in applying new language to familiar subjects, and in learning to use this language from the outside in. What has been gratifying for me is what these writers are saying: "This is the hardest thing I've ever done. But I'm really happy with it. I didn't know I could do this." When they ask, "Do you think the others will understand what I mean by this?" I send them to the rest of the group for the answer even when I think I already know, because this writing must focus on the audience, and in the contact zone, I am not the authority. This isn't the traditional fluency-to-analysis path that we have traditionally taken, and I have had to step way back and let them figure things out for themselves, but what I see happening is a new mastery and understanding of academic dialect that I hope will translate into greater mastery in future classes.

Conclusion

In reality the tutorial is not, nor should it be, all contact zones all the time. Every writer needs a safe space in which to practice this craft, and the writing center should offer this, too.

Instead, contact zone elements should be part of the whole experience. As a peer, not a teacher, it falls to me as a tutor to be willing to practice the same things that my writers are doing, and when it comes to giving up authority, this isn't always easy. Handing over control of text and language is a struggle because, due to my learned peer status, I know how to write formally, I know how to construct arguments and responses. It is infinitely more comfortable to take on the supportive "Let me show you what I know" role than it is to watch writers struggle. And yet when our writers struggle with this new language, when they talk among themselves about how and why academic language and writing are so "weird and different," they begin to understand the very nature of that difference. With this understanding comes new competence.

Last winter, I dared to say, "I don't know. Let's hash this out together." In the end, I changed as much as the writer did. I knew then that I was opening myself up to a relationship with the potential to affect my tutoring. At times, I struggled to let go of my own knowledge and let the student find her own way through formal writing. In the end, she left the center not only better and more confident as a writer, but also more assured of her own ability to navigate the university.

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