Stories from the Center

Connecting Narrative and Theory in the Writing Center

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9 Decentering Student-Centeredness: Rethinking Tutor Authority in Writing Centers

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> As I began to live out and interpret the consequences of how discourses of "critical reflection," "empowerment," "student voice," and "dialogue" had influenced my conceptualization of the goals of the course and my ability to make sense of my experiences in the class, I found myself struggling against (struggling to unlearn) key assumptions and assertions of current literature on critical pedagogy, and straining to recognize, name, and come to grips with crucial issues of classroom practice that critical pedagogy can not or will not address.
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> —Elizabeth Ellsworth
> "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?"

From the first time I read Elizabeth Ellsworth's article "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" (1992) she struck a chord in me, evoking memories of students I have worked with in writing centers and foregrounding my own concerns with the writing center's language of empowerment and student voice. In her article, Ellsworth questions the underlying assumptions of key terms in liberatory pedagogy. She writes about her attempts to put into practice teaching strategies meant to empower her students (92). However, instead of watching students become empowered, Ellsworth found that putting this liberatory discourse into practice "led (her) to reproduce relations of domination" between herself and students (91). Reading her account of the shortcomings of this liberatory discourse led me to begin considering whether the writing center community's talk about student-centered tutoring faces similar implications.

This essay reflects a combination of influences that have caused me to decenter—or stop taking for granted—my understanding of what student-centered tutoring is. One influence was my yearlong work with a student named Carlos, and the other was my turning to the writings of feminist pedagogists who, like Ellsworth, have struggled to deal

with gaps between the discourse of liberatory teaching and their own teaching practices. Their struggle with these gaps, in part, mirrors my own struggles to deal with disjunctures between my tutoring experiences with students like Carlos and the language of student-centeredness I heard in tutor meetings and read about in writing center publications. As a result of these influences, I decided to explore more carefully the writing center literature regarding our notions of authority and of being student-centered.

What does it mean for a tutor to be student-centered? Briefly, the central tenet of this philosophy is that students should be actively engaged and invested in their own learning. The role of a student-centered tutor is to act as an assistant or facilitator to students. Although differences exist among writing centers stemming from the particular histories and contexts that invests each writing center or writing lab with its own set of practices, this basic tenet is one of a few important similarities existing in writing center practice. For instance, many writing centers assume that most people learn better through social interaction and that writing centers ought to encourage students to become "practitioners" (Harris 1986, 28) and critical thinkers in their own right. Moreover, student-centered tutoring philosophies have played an important role not just for tutors but for the larger writing center community—helping this community define itself in relation to the typical classroom experiences of students who walk in our doors.

Importantly in this essay, it is in *how* the writing center community talks about accomplishing these goals that I locate my concerns, not in the overall goals themselves. Thus, this essay attempts to reveal some of the underlying, and limiting, assumptions of student-centered tutoring through the lenses offered, first, by my work with Carlos and, second, by the narratives of feminist pedagogy. It is my hope that both of these perspectives may provide the writing center community with productive insights into tutor-student relationships. Before discussing the pedagogical concerns and assumptions writing center educators and feminist teachers share, let me begin with the student who started me down this path of questioning or decentering the idea of student-centeredness in the writing center literature.

Tutoring Carlos

Before I encountered Ellsworth's story and those of other feminist pedagogists, there was Carlos. My own concerns with the language of student-centeredness in writing centers grew, in part, from my experience as Carlos's tutor. He helped me recognize cracks in my

taken-for-granted assumptions about what good tutoring is. A Hispanic student from Chicago, Carlos faced many adjustments when he came to a small, isolated northern town to attend an engineering university whose population is overwhelmingly white, middle class, and male. More than a little soft-spoken, Carlos rarely spoke; instead he whispered, so I began whispering too. For three quarters we met once a week, and, amidst the writing center clamor of tutors and students talking and phones ringing, we whispered back and forth.

Carlos's silence and whispers, and the distance they presented, challenged my beliefs about the concept of dialogue as good tutoring. I had come to think of dialogue as a technique through which students learn to take charge of their learning. Tutor-student dialogues create an atmosphere in which students are equally (or even more) responsible for the learning that occurs. In this way, tutors act as facilitators, drawing out students' insights. Because of Carlos, my understanding of dialogue had to be reconstructed. Typically, our sessions began with him pulling out a draft of a paper, sometimes an assignment, and shoving it way out in front of him on the table. Then, slouched back in his chair or sometimes hunched over, chin in hands, he would sit, looking out the window. In a year of tutoring, Carlos rarely looked at me, only occasionally glancing sideways in my direction. His paper always managed to be out of our reach, positioned far across the table from us both. Every week I'd think, "Do I start with him or with this paper?" It was an odd question, I know. Students, not me, usually start by directing our sessions toward whatever issues or questions are uppermost in their minds, but almost everything about tutoring Carlos jogged me out of ordinary habits and assumptions.

It is difficult to capture in writing exactly how Carlos and I worked together, but let me try to describe a typical session. Often, I'd begin by asking him for a cue: I'd ask, "What do you want to work on today?" Pause. Under his breathe came the answer, "That," meaning the draft or assignment sheet sitting across from us on the table. "What is it?" I'd ask. Pause. With his gaze fixed on the floor or out the window, he'd mumble something. "What?" I'd say, leaning forward. Pause. This time a little louder, he'd say, "It's about rap music and censorship." "What do you think about it?" I'd ask. Pause. "I don't know." Pause. "I guess it's bad," he'd whisper. "The rap music is bad or censoring is bad?" I'd ask. Pause. Sighing, he'd say, "I guess they both are." "Why do you think so?" I'd ask. Longer pause. "I don't know. It's in the paper," he'd softly answer looking at the floor. So, we would pull the paper closer and read it (I often read it aloud to him). When his paper was near us, Carlos backed his chair away from the table, and his gaze wandered

around the room. I learned over time that this didn't mean he wasn't listening as I read aloud. He seemed to need to put distance between himself and his papers. After reading, I'd frequently wait for him to speak first, not wanting to direct him. "Is it okay?" Carlos would likely ask me. "What do you think?" I would counter. Longer pause. "It needs work I guess." Pause. "That's what the teacher said." Pause. "She wants more personal stuff." Pause. "What I think." Here was a direction for us. "Okay, what do you think about rap music and censorship?" He glanced at me quickly and whispered, "I don't know." At this point, I'd pause, thinking what to make of that. Sometimes, I'd suggest he look back through the reading to see if he agreed or disagreed with one of the authors—a sideways way for him to start expressing a personal opinion. We'd come up with a list of some of the attitudes expressed in the readings, and the session would end with him hedging close to one of them. As he put the paper away, I'd ask, "Does this help you with this draft? Do you have ideas for where to add your opinion?" Standing up to leave, he'd look at me and whisper, "Yeah, I guess so."

In over a year of tutoring, Carlos and I rarely broke from this pattern. Was this good tutoring? As with all the students I tutored, I did not want to direct him. Rather, I consciously tried to focus on whatever Carlos wanted us to discuss. I wanted to maintain a student-centered approach that privileged his insights, his ability to learn to answer his own questions. In our sessions, I wanted to send him the message that his paper was his to improve—not mine. I wanted Carlos to feel empowered through our dialogue to develop his personal voice in his writing. However, all of these assumptions about good tutoring became as frail as a house of cards when week after week I sat next to him waiting, straining to hear his voice, and wondering about his detaching attitude. Carlos helped me recognize three related inconsistencies with these assumptions about being student-centered.

First, Carlos' actions helped me realize the extent to which student-center tutoring helps mask the fact that teachers have ultimate authority over the shape and content of students' writing. What Carlos knew all along, and what I slowly began to understand, is that the voice he needed to develop in his writing was not so much his own as it was his teacher's. In this way, he began to reconstruct my understanding of tutor-student dialogue and of being student-centered. The distance Carlos maintained went beyond the physical distances he kept with me and with his papers—whispering under his breath, rarely making eye contact, and remaining removed from his papers. There was also a distance in his writing. He never elaborated on the topic of any paper with personal examples or opinions. Even the fact that assignments called for

his personal experiences and opinions never swayed him into offering them. He was uninterested in opening up in his writing or to me. As a result, he consistently made C's or lower in his writing classes. When I asked him about his opinions on various paper topics, Carlos gave me one of two responses: he'd pause, look at me, and either answer "I don't know" or tell me what his teacher wanted the class to say. Over and over, Carlos ignored or refused my attempts to encourage him to develop his personal voice or his ability to take charge of his learning. Politely and quietly, he'd change the subject back to the question of what the teacher wanted.

Second, Carlos's actions helped me realize the extent to which student-centered tutoring puts students in vulnerable positions by expecting them to open up about themselves. As a tutor, I had grown used to having an easy rapport with students in the writing center. Like other tutors, my sessions were begun, interrupted, and ended with the stuff of student's lives—their course loads, their new best friends, their homesickness. With Carlos, however, our sessions were stripped bare of that chatting. The few times we talked about his personal life he revealed a life filled with the painful struggles that came from growing up as the son of migrant farm workers who'd settled in a high crime area of urban Chicago. The realities of his home life and university experience didn't lend themselves to easy conversation. Everything about him marked him as different, and, rather than expose those differences, I think he chose silence. He kept his voice to himself, sharing only the softest tones with me and shading his writing with it in only the most general ways.

Third, Carlos helped me realize the extent to which student-centered tutoring assumes that tutors and students have a similar social and school knowledge base from which they can relate to each other. Carlos and I did not. We might have been enrolled in the same school (he as a first-year student and I as a graduate student), but our similarities seemed to end there. It was Carlos who showed me this with his silence and his careful distance. I never doubted that the Carlos I came to know in the writing center—whispering, detached, and silent—was only one very small part of his identity.

In the end, Carlos taught me that writing centers are places where we see how the politics of the academy shape students' educational experiences. Too often their experiences teach them that the cultures and literacies that have given them a sense of identity are not privileged by academic institutions. As his tutor, I wanted to be someone who could help Carlos bridge the gaps between his home literacies and those of the institution. In whispers we worked together, but like Belinda, the

tutor Alice Gillam describes in "Writing Center Ecology: A Bakhtinian Perspective," I often felt at a loss, realizing that Carlos was "stripping [his] stories to the skeleton to please [his] instructors" (1991, 5). Given the pressure students feel to achieve (and in Carlos's case, to survive), I sometimes felt I had "no choice but to encourage [Carlos] to 'normalize' [his] voice so that [he] could be heard and found acceptable in the academy" (5). In the end, I felt emptied of some of my zeal for the language of "empowering students" and of "student-centeredness" that filled discussion during weekly tutors' meetings and normally buoyed me through the week. In a search for answers, I began exploring the *how* of student-centered tutoring in writing center literature. In other words, according to our own discourse, how is student-centered tutoring meant to be practiced?

How the Writing Center Community Addresses Authority in Student-Centered Tutoring

Writing center educators have often argued that student-centered practices provide students an alternative to the often unequal relationship of power maintained in many writing classrooms. In her retrospective of the growth and development of tutoring learning centers, Marian Arkin provides an illustrative articulation of the perspective many writing center people have regarding problems with traditional educational approaches:

> My suspicion is that emphasis on product—on how many things a student knows—is really a way of disempowering the learner, of increasing his or her dependence on authority, an authority empowered by tradition; it is, in sum, the power of a white, patriarchal, essentially reactionary establishment, an establishment that encourages everyone to come to the game and compete, but loads the cultural dice in its favor beforehand. (1990, 6)

In response to her concern, many writing center educators have maintained a philosophy that seeks to empower students, that values the languages and the ways of knowing students bring with them to the university. Writing center tutors and directors have claimed the role of student advocate. Because of their insights about students and about academic institutions, in recent years, writing centers have been acknowledged as "having an essential function of critiquing institutions and creating knowledge about writing" (Cooper 98). Moreover, Nancy Grimm has suggested that "writing centers have much to teach the [composition] profession about how difference is managed in the academy and about how students' subjectivities are constructed by

educational discourse" (1992, 5). I believe many in the writing center community agree with Grimm that we have been changed by our interactions with students, and this is perhaps why student-centered philosophies have achieved a centrality in the writing center community as few other practices have.

It is because of its centrality and because writing centers offer the composition profession a critical view of itself that writing center educators need to reflect on how student-centered pedagogies have constructed our practices—how student-centered practices construct tutors' and students' roles. After all, pedagogy is never only a set of teaching or tutoring strategies to be judged on the basis of "what works." Rather, pedagogy, as a concept, enacts a set of assumptions that, as Lusted contends, "draws attention to the *process* through which knowledge is produced" (quoted in Gore 1993, 4). Thus, in writing center tutoring strategies lie implications for what does and does not count as knowledge and for what good tutoring is.

When reading through several essays that address what it means to be student-centered, one notices that these essays inevitably address the relations of power, as we in writing centers see them, between students and teachers and students and tutors. For instance, in "Non-Directive Tutoring Strategies," Kay Satre and Valerie Traub contend that "Our belief in non-directive intervention is largely based in our criticism of the current educational system which operates by virtue of unequal power relations between students and teachers" (1988, 5). In contrast, suggest Satre and Traub, the power in the relationship between students and tutors rests more in the needs and concerns of students. Satre and Traub's notions about student-centeredness or non-directiveness—in their emphasis on tutor's responsiveness to students and on students as active writers—embodies a common approach or language the writing center discourse projects regarding this pedagogy (Arkin and Shollar 1982; Meyer and Smith 1987; Severino; and Fletcher 1993). Being non-directive, they say, allows students to feel they are actually being listened to, and this makes students feel more attached to what they are trying to say. And, because, as Satre and Traub say, non-directive coaches do not pass judgment on students, emphasis can be shifted away from "apprehension of error and toward the development of meaning" (5).

The discourse's specific advice about student-centered tutoring is, therefore, often aimed at ensuring that students' needs control their tutoring sessions, and that they remain the primary agents of their writing. Jeff Brooks offers a list of tutoring strategies in his 1992 article

"Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work." The strategies have been identified frequently over the years as basic student-centered or "minimalist" tutoring strategies (cf. Edwards 1983; Harris 1986; Ryan 1993; and Wilcox 1994). These strategies include "Sit beside the student, not across a desk"; Make sure the student is "physically closer to the paper than you are"; "[D]on't let yourself have a pencil in your hand"; and "Get the student to talk. . . . Ask questions—perhaps 'leading' questions—as often as possible" (1991, 3–4). These strategies are intended to demonstrate to students that they, not tutors, are the ones in charge of the paper (3). Brooks emphasizes this point by contending that "the student, not the tutor, should 'own' the paper and take full responsibility for it" (2).

The notion that students should be the primary agents, indeed "the only active agent[s]," Brooks says (4), in improving their writing is based in a desire to empower students. Satre and Traub speak of "handing power back to students" (5), and in "Posing Questions: The Student-Centered Tutorial Session" (1989), Patricia Fanning invokes the notion of empowerment by saying that tutors should "encourage students to discover and solve their own problems" (1). At the heart of these arguments lies a belief that the best learning environments are those in which students actively engage in the whole learning process. The desire to empower students is shared by many calling for change in the composition profession. Yet, as Marilyn Cooper pointed out in her 1993 keynote address to the Pacific Regional Writing Centers Conference, though many support these efforts, it has "turned out to be decidedly difficult to enact" (7).

I would argue that, much like conceptions of authority within liberatory pedagogy that face increasing examination, the previously mentioned outline of student-centered strategies reveals a view of authority as something one "owns" and/or "hands over" to others, and writing center educators ought to consider the implications such a view of authority holds for tutoring practices. The driving force behind enacting a student-centered pedagogy within writing centers has been to create learning environments in which students actively engage in their learning. However, the view of authority as something owned obstructs those original intentions, for, as writing center educators continue to talk about being student-centered as a process of *turning over* power or ownership to students, the question becomes: how liberating is this practice since, as the conferrers of authority, the writing tutor retains much control?

Decentering Definitions of Authority in Writing Center Discourse

There are two related notions of power embedded in the way writing center educators talk about being student-centered that I want to highlight, in order to demonstrate some of my concerns with them: The first is the notion of power as property, and the second is the zero-sum notion of power. First of all, when writing center discourse speaks of students as owning their writing or tutors giving authority to students, that discourse is viewing power as though it were property. Such an approach is misleading because it equates power with specific objects. In contrast, I believe power is better understood as a series of constantly shifting actions. Certainly objects can be invested with authority. However, it is through the actions of people (in this case, students and tutors) that objects or practices are invested with meaning. As Michel Foucault explains, "power must be analysed as something which circulates. . . . It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth" (1980, 98). For instance, power is not inherent in a pencil in a tutor's hand. Power, or the lack of it, is demonstrated in how that pencil is and is not used in given situations by both students and tutors. Consequently, practices or policies meant to enforce or sustain authority only do so in the actual actions of individuals. As Foucault writes,

> Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. . . . In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (98)

Unfortunately, too often for the sake of defining policy, the writing center discourse oversimplifies how tutors and students relate to each other. For instance, in the discourse about student-centeredness, writing center educators are being discouraged from acknowledging the ways in which *both* tutors and students express authority as they relate to each other—authority that is varied, temporary, and overlapping at times.

By constructing writing center practice around a view of power as property, writing center educators are overlooking a number of points of tension that exist within student-centered pedagogies. Earlier I mentioned the points of tension that arose for me working with Carlos. Other writing center educators and feminist pedagogists like Ellsworth have developed their own as well. The first point of tension is that, because writing tutors are the ones who are choosing to turn power over to students, this "property" remains very much in the tutors' control. In "Reevaluation of the Question as a Teaching Tool" (1993), JoAnn B. Johnson illustrates this tension in her discussion of how using questions promotes the tutor's, not the student's, sense of control. She describes this as a problem of "needs location" (38). Johnson explains that "when the tutor composes a question for the student, it is based on the tutor's perception of need within the student; consequently, the attention of both student and tutor are focused on what the tutor chooses as need" (38–39). Hence, it is possible that, instead of student-centered strategies enabling students to actively engage in their learning, writing tutors may be maintaining students' positions as outsiders whose entrance into academic acceptance needs to be controlled. In this way, the notion of empowerment carries with it an agent of empowerment (someone or something doing the empowering) that has begun to be questioned by feminist pedagogists as reproducing old lines of hierarchy within the discourse of liberatory educational practices (cf. Gore 1993).

A second point of tension emerges as feminist pedagogists (among others) have questioned the notion of students' ownership of their writing. When one considers that teachers usually determine nearly all, if not all, of the parameters within which students produce writing, basing tutoring philosophies on the notion that students own their writing becomes problematic. Decisions about reading material, method of organization, audience, format, style, and page-length requirements are often already made for students by teachers. This understanding must cause us to question the extent to which it can be said that students *own* their texts—a point which, in my experience with Carlos, was made painfully clear. And, perhaps, this will lead writing center educators to consider Marilyn Cooper's suggestion in "Really Useful Knowledge" (1994) that writing tutors might best be able to help students achieve agency as writers

> by helping them understand how and the extent to which they are *not* owners of their texts; by helping them understand, in short, how various institutional forces impinge on how and what they write and how they can negotiate a place for their own goals and needs when faced with these forces. (8)

Thus, a second concern the discourse of student-centeredness raises is that speaking about student agency as tied to notions of ownership clouds over the reality that teachers, more so than students, control what students write.

A third point of tension emerges concerning the scholarship in composition studies that has begun questioning the assumption that students' writing improves as they gain control of their thought processes

(cf. Miller 1991; Faigley 1994; and Cooper and Holzman 1989). As Lester Faigley has noted, in the last ten years much theoretical work in composition studies has "critiqued the central abstraction in current-traditional rhetoric and in many process-oriented approaches to teaching writing—the image of the writer as a discrete, coherent, stable self capable of rationally directing and rationally evaluating its own activities" (1994, 215). Through the influence of cultural studies, feminist theories, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, writing theorists have recognized that "knowledge is always situated" and that writers "articulate relations between a possible self and a possible reality (which includes possible others) in their prose, rather than a one real self and one real reality" (Brodkey 1994, 239). In light of this, writing center educators need to question whether or not student-centered pedagogies may be operating under a narrow idea of how people write. In "From Silence to Noise: The Writing Center as Critical Exile" 1993, Nancy Welch comments on this:

> My work in the writing center at a large public university has also introduced me to students who arrive at the center already aware, sometimes painfully so, that their meanings are contested and that their words are populated with competing, contradictory voices. . . . Even alone, these students write with and against a cacophony of voices, collaborating not with one person but with the Otherness of their words. (4)

In focusing on principles of writing instruction that assume people's inner selves are unified by a rational logic, writing centers educators may not be addressing the ways in which students write within a multiplicity of competing voices which are flavored by their ethnicity, gender, religious identity, class, and position in the academy.

The second view of power embedded in the way writing center educators talk about being student-centered is that power is a zero-sum concept. This concept holds that, if power is "given" to students in order to empower them, then tutors must "give up" their power. By representing tutoring practices in this way, the writing center discourse may not recognize the constant circulating of authority that we know happens when tutors work with students—how their needs and actions interact with the tutor's needs and actions as well as the needs and actions of the teacher. This representation also encourages us to think of tutors who exercise authority as always bad and students who exercise authority as always good—promoting a clear-cut view of tutoring that is out of step with many tutors' actual experiences of working with students. In a series of interviews of fellow writing tutors that I conducted for a pilot study regarding tutor-student interaction, one tutor

named Dave expressed this point rather well. Dave answered my question "What has it been like working in the writing center?" by talking about the kind of control he has as a tutor (as compared to the kind of control he has a teacher). He acknowledged that it's "a different kind of control" and that he's "balancing directedness with nondirectedness all the time." Throughout the interview, Dave emphasized this balancing between "control" and "keying in on the student's needs," and there is an awareness of the ways in which tutors and students may be expressing authority to varying degrees simultaneously, which the literature on student-centered practices does not reflect.

Rethinking Student-Centered Tutoring: A Feminist Rearticulation of Authority

In the course of reflecting on my work with Carlos and the tensions revealed in my close reading of writing center literature on student-centeredness, I was also exploring the same questions about authority in the literature of feminist pedagogy. Strong similarities exist between the goals of feminist pedagogy and some of the basic premises of writing center practices. For example, feminist educating practices are generally characterized as being deeply concerned with increasing students' sense of agency, validating differences, challenging universal truths, and seeking to create social transformation in a world of shifting meanings. Moreover, of equal importance to me, feminist pedagogists have begun examining their own notions of authority in the student-centered language of their discourse, and they are moving to resolve tensions existing in the underlying assumptions of their practices.

Reviewing the literature of feminist pedagogy reveals a movement, over time, in how authority is viewed. In the past, many feminist pedagogists addressed authority or power as inevitably connected to patriarchal systems of control, and, therefore, bad. Thus, in order to distance themselves from imposing an authority they view as denying dialogue, feminist educators concentrated on developing nondirective teaching practices and on viewing educators as nurturing facilitators (cf. Quinn 1987; Frey 1987; Grumet 1988, 115; Schniedewind 1987; and Shrewsbury 1987). In response to this approach, however, a movement is growing within feminist pedagogy that has suggested these original approaches may need to be reconsidered (cf. Friedman 1985; Ellsworth 1992; and hooks 1994). The question in feminist pedagogy has become: by presenting ourselves as not having any authority, aren't we supporting the very assumptions (that women aren't capable of being figures of authority) that the feminist movement sought to oppose? Also, Madeleine

Grumet has argued that by continually denying one's authority in this way, educators lose their ability to speak from a position of greater insight. In taking this approach to authority, teachers and tutors risk "relinquish[ing] the power of pedagogy" (Grumet 1988, 115)—the capacity to share their knowledge of the world with students.

Growing discussion of this nature has led feminist pedagogists to develop educating practices that recognize the contradictory nature of power. (To cite a writing center example, as tutors we are simultaneously considered experts or "insiders" by students and novices or "outsiders" by faculty.) Moreover, they argue that these practices recognize that each of us as individuals constantly negotiates among many different identities or subjectivities as we seek to empower students.

As a result of this new movement, feminist pedagogists have begun developing another approach that moves away from traditional views of women (and writing tutors for that matter) in positions of authority. Though women have and do assert authority in the classroom, this authority often maintains forms of domination, silencing students under the disciplinary eyes of teachers (Walkerdine 1992, 19–20; Friedman 1985; Grumet).

However, rather than denying authority, argue these pedagogists, people who seek to enact a feminist pedagogy need to realize the need to women, and others to whom authority has been denied, to claim a different kind of authority. Feminist and civil rights activist bell hooks suggests that it is vital that this different kind of authority not be based in patriarchal concepts of power or stereotypical definitions of women. She writes, "The suggestion that women must obtain power before they can effectively resist sexism is rooted in the false assumption that women have no power" (1994, 90). Instead, she borrows from the work of Elizabeth Janeway to explain that one of the most important forms of power available to those who have been taught that demonstrating power is inappropriate (i.e., women, writing tutors, and students) is "the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful" (quoted in hooks 90). Exercising "the power of disbelief" is a basic personal power that women from all races and classes and people like writing tutors and even our students need to understand as "an act of resistance and strength" (hooks 90–91).

Importantly, refusing the definition of reality students and tutors are expected to assume first requires students and tutors to be open to talking about their roles *as* constructs, and to make their relationship to each other and to the writing instructor explicit. Writing center educators and students need to be open not only to negotiation of these relationships but also tolerant of the contradictions and conflicts inherent in this kind of educational practice. Openness to this kind of questioning would also

extend to examining students' relationships to their writing—perhaps causing us to question, as Marilyn Cooper suggests, the extent to which students have any say in what or how they write.

Moreover, rejecting the myth of students' ownership of their writing requires us to face students like Carlos steeled, not with the repressive rhetoric pervading much student-centered practice, but with the recognition that both of us—students and tutors—have a "plural personality," that we "operate in a pluralistic mode" (Anzaldúa 1987, 79). Anzaldúa's suggestion is that tutors acknowledge that we all negotiate among multiple identities as we navigate within the university's or college's demands. We need to make that balancing act part of the conversation between students and tutors. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands/LaFrontera* (1987), in order to transcend dualistic thinking that maintains hierarchical relationships, we must develop "a consciousness of the Borderlands" (77) of the ways in which we experience and claim many identities, many cultures, and operate within and through these identities and cultures. "In attempting to work out a synthesis" of these many and often opposing powers, she writes, it is necessary for the self to create a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—from whose energy comes "continual creative motion that keeps breaking down . . . each new paradigm" (80):

> *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and give them new meanings. (81)

I acknowledge that this view of authority does not assume, as most traditional feminist models do, that people (especially women and people traditionally defined as Other) develop best in a nurturing and safe atmosphere. This view of authority requires a more up-front relationship between educators and students: one that recognizes that open questioning and negotiation have a tremendous transformative, and sometimes discomforting, effect. Yet we must see this, as bell hooks suggests, as "a constructive sign of growth" (1994, 103). Carlos's experience in the university was not nurturing after all; it was not a kind place to him. How many times have I wondered if our experience together might have been different if I had taken a less passive role? If, instead of avoiding our differences, we had openly addressed them? The end result may still have been the same, but I cannot help wondering. Certainly, he decentered my own understanding of what good tutoring is, and the struggle he provoked in me over my assumptions about being student-centered have led me from writing center work to feminist pedagogy and back again.

Conclusion

Writing centers balance on the boundaries between students and institutions: At the same time students' private worlds and the public world of the institution are coming into conflict, so are writing tutors' roles as collaborators who understand the epistemological value of a writer's personal experiences and their roles as savvy insiders who demystify the complexity of academic discourse for student writers. Tutoring Carlos changed how I think about tutoring forever, and my concern with the language of student-centeredness in writing center discourse led me to an exploration of feminist pedagogy's attempts to rearticulate notions of authority in order to provide an alternative perspective of the ways we talk about issues of authority.

What feminist pedagogy offers writing center educators is another conception of authority, one that might allow tutors to develop more active roles because it perceives educators and students as expressing authority that is varied, temporary, and mutually dependent on the other. It calls on tutors and students to question how their roles are defined and to open these up to negotiation, as well as to address the hidden but ever-present influence of students' writing instructors on their development as writers. It is the project of feminist pedagogy to create spaces where people, drawing on their lived experiences, can reflect on the social processes that have shaped them in order to critique these social processes. My hope is that writing centers, long dedicated to critique of the ways academic settings silence and subordinate students, may consider how the paths of these feminist teachers and writers may reflect and extend our own paths.

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