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A (Re)cognition of Peerness as Friendship

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One Friday afternoon last semester, I had an awkward encounter in the writing center. A male graduate student came to the center shortly after twelve o'clock. We had just closed for the weekend, and the other graduate laboratory assistants I work with had left, but I stayed to pack up my books for an afternoon class. At first, he popped his head through the doorway and asked if we were still open. Referring him to our posted hours and explaining that I was on my way to a graduate seminar, I apologized, but firmly said, "We're closed." Instead of leaving or asking to make an appointment for Monday morning, he began a lengthy explanation of why he needed immediate help—his paper was already a week late, he had been out of town, and his professor had unrealistically high expectations. Like many frantic writers, he argued that he would only need a few minutes of my time because he only needed grammar help. After five minutes or so, in his last plea for me to read his paper, he said, "Come on, baby, you could have read my paper by now."

This statement, taken with his aggressive postures and behavior, could hardly be evidence of "peerness." This male student never asked my name nor indicated his; neither did he listen when I proposed alternate solutions, such as talking with his professor, asking a friend to read his paper, or making an appointment for Monday morning. To him, I was merely a service provider. And he was annoyed that I was unwilling to be at his service. Finally, the writing center director (and the professor of my afternoon class) used her authority as faculty to say she was locking the door and both of us were leaving for class. Only then did

he leave, too. I left that afternoon with a general sense of unease about my position as a writing tutor.

Earlier on that same Friday, I had two relatively successful conferences in the writing center. First, I worked with a sophomore political science major from an introductory government course. She wanted to brainstorm ideas of how a classical liberal theorist would critique the American model of representation. Then, a student from Thailand, who was enrolled in first-year English for ESL students, brought a three-paragraph, summary-connection-analysis paper to revise. I had previously worked with both students. This was my third conference with the sophomore (I'll call her Faith) and perhaps my tenth with the first-year student (Cindy). Both writers and I were constructing positive working relationships built on trust, mutual interests, and developing friendship. Considering our relationships, I suspect that collaboration and co-learning are influenced less by peerness or "status equality" (Gillam 50) than by the fact that we enjoy one another's company. While theorists often characterize writing center work as peer tutoring, inequalities exist according to academic standing, writing experience, confidence, and familiarity in the tutorial. Additionally, identity groupings such as race, class, and gender interfere with peerness. Drawing on experiences from my own tutoring, I am suggesting an alternate model for characterizing relationships: rather than considering tutors and writers to be peers, we should promote interactions based on friendship.

Writing center scholars Kenneth Bruffee, Alice Gillam, Diane Morrow,

Linda Shamoon, Deborah Burns, John Trimbur, and others identify varied "problems with peerness." Still, many of their essays assume collaboration can be achieved among writers and tutors because we are "peers." Shamoon and Burns, for instance, argue that "[t]rue collaboration occurs when the participants are 'part of the same discourse community and meet as equals'" (175). Equality can be achieved in a number of ways, but the term implies that participants share responsibility, knowledge, or activity in the writing conference. Most often, equality presumes peerness, that writers and tutors are basically the same (both are students who do academic writing). Although faculty and professional adjuncts may tutor, students more generally staff writing centers. What I am questioning is whether the simple categorization of "student" implies peerness.

Peer status may be broken down by a number of differences between writer and tutor. Of primary importance is the matter of academic standing. First-year undergraduates and doctoral candidates are both "students," but there are a number of years, courses, and completed assignments separating them. Trimbur's "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" accurately describes the conflicting loyalties tutors experience when invested with institutional authority. Still, Trimbur only presents undergraduate tutoring scenarios. In Georgia State's Writing Studio, our tutors are graduate students, but the majority of writers who visit us are undergraduates. This difference in academic standing exacerbates an already-recognized power imbalance.

Compounding this inequality, tutors generally have extensive writing experiences and read and write regularly (and enjoy doing so). Moreover, students sometimes ask if I am studying English, as though this disciplinary knowledge marks a person's greatness in composition. Additionally, while tutors certainly have doubts and uncertainties, as do all students at times, they have greater confidence and familiarity in the tutorial. Writing tutors know the task at hand: they are better aware of strategies and approaches to writing as well as the university's and professor's expectations for academic writing. Tutors also spend significant time in the writing center, so the space is comfortable and familiar to them. Situated in a recognizable room with work they know and perhaps enjoy, tutors are in a position of power. Writers, on the other hand, enter a new and often strange setting with difficult work ahead. In addition to differences in academic standing and writing experience, confidence and familiarity set tutors and writers apart.

My undergraduate writing center at Agnes Scott College came closer to achieving peerness, although many of the same inequalities were present. Academic standing was more equal in the sense that all tutors and writers were undergraduate students. Additionally, many tutors, myself included, represented disciplines other than English. Our multi-disciplinary writing center showed that everyone has access to writing knowledge; English majors were not somehow separated as the "good writers" on campus. While we enjoyed writing and were constantly engaged in the composition process for our own coursework, we had similar writing experiences as the students who visited the writing center. Perhaps most importantly, confidence and familiarity were more evenly distributed. The center's space allowed for students

to "hang out" in the writing center and become accustomed to the setting. Many writers used the computers and free printing to work on papers. Tutors were required to see each other for tutoring. This meant that we never felt too removed from the side of the writer/tutee. We knew what it felt like to be criticized or told to scrap whole sections of text. Despite these steps toward achieving peerness among writers and tutors, inequalities remained in the writing center. The writer, for instance, was seeking help (whether it be simply a second reader or a language instructor), and the tutor was paid to help. Moreover, the tutor chose to work in the center and to spend her time there; writers, oftentimes, would prefer just to have the paper done. These differences presented serious challenges to status equality.

The limitations of peerness are illustrated in my two Friday tutoring conferences—and in the third awkward situation. In the conferences with Faith and Cindy, I was older, further along in my studies, more experienced with writing, and more certain of the space around me as well as my approach to the assignments. In the third encounter, a very different limitation to peerness arose. The male graduate student's insistent, even bullying, behavior leads me to believe that he never saw me as an equal. Instead, I was the lowly woman, reduced to "baby," who should help elevate the male to his prominent position, reinforcing the gender hierarchy. As Eileen Schell observes, women teachers have often been expected to bring feminine domestic qualities into their work—to be generous, sensitive to the needs of others, and willing to self-sacrifice (22). This particular male student expected me not only to bend the rules for him, but also to give of my own time. In this context, it was not a matter of academic standing or experience with writing that created inequality; rather, gender expectations destroyed any possibility of collaboration.

I believe, therefore, that peerness should be conceived less as a matter of status equality and more in terms of opportunities for co-learning or shared activity in the writing conference. Bruffee conceives of peer tutoring as "a two-way street, since students' work tended to improve when they got help from peer tutors and tutors learned from the students they helped and from the activity of tutoring itself" (207). In conferences with Faith and Cindy, I learn as much from them as I believe they learn from me. Still, I would not characterize our interactions as "peer tutoring" because our motivations for and types of learning are different. Faith has said she enjoys working with me because I understand her discipline (political science) and talk out complicated arguments with her. Perhaps we gain equal satisfaction and learning from our brainstorming sessions, but Faith looks to me for disciplinary and writing knowledge, while I learn from her more about tutoring, the teaching of government at Georgia State, and the way she constructs arguments (her method is very different from mine, so I am learning a new strategy in the process of tutoring).

From Cindy, I learn about her home and culture in Thailand, her experiences in America, her understandings and methods of learning English, and her unique interests in technology (from cloning to uses of the Internet). Cindy says I help her understand the structure of American writing (from thesis statements to sentence variation). We often use the dictionary, and in the process, I learn more about English—word origins, uses, and parts of speech. By the third or fourth tutoring session, I learned that Cindy has a wonderful sense of humor, and I had missed it in her first papers. She helped me reconsider my focus when tutoring and explore why it took me some time to recognize this very important part of her personality. In both tutoring relationships, I serve as a co-learner. The sessions are quasi-

collaborative, and I enjoy working with the writers. Nonetheless, I believe our relative success in tutoring is rooted in our enjoyment of each other's company and our subsequent open conversations about writing. Perhaps co-learning grows out of friendship more than from peerness.

Friendship (or similar interests, as Pythagoras indicates that "friends share all things," and Plato argues that "friends have all things in common") may also lead to shared active roles that counter writers' passivity and instead promote collaboration. Morrow describes writers' passivity in conferences as a limitation to her collaboration: "most students begin by assuming the tutor is in charge; most students come into the session taking a passive role" (221). In addition to waiting for the tutor to set the agenda, or "take charge," students often view tutors as authority figures (Morrow 222). When Cindy first came to the writing center, I did feel she wanted an authority, someone to teach her more about the English language and American writing. After a few sessions, however, we had developed a relationship where I served more as a second reader and occasional critic. This shift was largely achieved by asking questions so that Cindy can explain and clarify her ideas and arguments. I write while she talks, and this helps develop her language skills, while working on the assignment at hand. Now when Cindy comes to a session, she has a clear agenda and tells me what she wants to achieve.

A similar process has occurred with Faith. After a particularly rough session with her paper due later that day, she came for her next conference well in advance of the due date and with a clear agenda of what she wanted to accomplish. During our sessions, Faith uses me more as a friend when we casually talk out ideas and take rough notes from each other's suggestions. We share active roles and participation. Just as Madeline Grumet argues that "knowledge evolves in human re-

lationships" (qtd. in Cambridge 75), our social interaction strengthens and even creates our understandings of composition and content. But is this related to "peerness"?

Alice Gillam similarly critiques peerness when she suggests that factors other than status equality account for collaborative relationships. She poses the question: "is . . . 'intimacy' and rapport a result of . . . 'status equality' or a product of chance factors—shared gender, ethnicity, class background, and investment in academic success?" (50). Faith, Cindy, and I come from different ethnic and class backgrounds, but we do care about school and share commitments of doing well in classes. Gender undoubtedly influences our work together. Neither Faith nor Cindy would ever call me "baby" or ask me to change the rules and sacrifice my personal time. Just as they trust me to be sincere and to help in the best way I can, I trust them to respect that I am a fully feeling and thinking person, not just "a tutor" in the writing center. Our working relationships have developed through learning about and respecting each other. We will never be "peers" in the sense that many writing center theorists might describe us because our school and writing experiences create divisions. It is in life experience and our basic humanity that we find equality. Rather than striving for peerness (sameness), we should get to know writers as people and work toward friendship.

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