

12-5-2017

# Warm Smiles, Soft Chairs: A Testament to the Power of Ambience

Cari Phillips  
*Utah State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc\\_tutor](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor)

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Phillips, Cari, "Warm Smiles, Soft Chairs: A Testament to the Power of Ambience" (2017). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 7.  
[https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc\\_tutor/7](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor/7)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the USU Writing Center at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tutor's Column by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [rebecca.nelson@usu.edu](mailto:rebecca.nelson@usu.edu).



Warm Smiles, Soft Chairs:  
A Testament to the Power of Ambience

Cari Phillips

December 5, 2017

English 4910 - Star Coulbrooke

Utah State University

Keywords: Ambience, Writing Centers, Learning Environments, Tutor Affect, Layout, Decoration, Comfort, and Confidence.

Abstract:

In this paper I discuss the effects of positive ambience within a writing center environment. Effective writing centers encourage student relaxation through positive tutor affect, soothing nature-based decor, and organization that promotes low power-distance. The use of open, friendly attitudes, warm colors, and breathing room allow writing center attendees to relax. As a result, attendees of this kind of writing center are more effective, engaged, and motivated to dig deep while pursuing the writing process. Combining research with personal experience, I relate an effective writing center to a positive classroom learning environment, comparing the effects of various methods of classroom/center organization.

The first time I enter a classroom, I feel I already understand much about my teacher. For instance, my high school Physics teacher's classroom was blindingly, painfully white. Nothing but cupboards and deathly pale walls in every direction. And it was silent; so silent that I literally remember the sound of a pin dropping from the ancient bulletin board. It rang in a tiny peal of alarm and the class stared blankly at our teacher as he slowly bent over to pick it up. Pristine textbooks, perfect rows of desks, and squeaky clean chalkboards lay in every direction. I didn't breathe too loudly, didn't speak, and certainly didn't make any unnecessary noises. The excessively draining environment made learning very difficult.

My Spanish teacher's room, by contrast, was an explosion of pigment and, dare I add, life. Dozens of brilliantly colored piñatas hung from the ceiling, and the room smelled enticingly of salsa. Each wall was a different tropical color - coral, teal, grass green, and buttery yellow. Hispanic dance music blasted into the hallways, and the students sang along cheerfully as they worked. My teacher, physically a gringa but clearly a Latina at heart, strutted down her classroom "runway" as she instructed us. I thrived in the deliciously spicy climate. Clearly, the affect of a classroom manipulates the way in which its students learn, develop, and express themselves.

Similarly, I remember the first time I entered the USU Writing Center for my high school English 1010 class. I had expected, admittedly with some anxiety, to sit in a large computer lab with tutors walking up and down the rows, making critiques as students sat in hard metal chairs and typed furiously on computers. As I walked into the somewhat formidable Ray B. West building, I was pleasantly surprised by the warm tones of the walls. Making my way uncertainly down the stairs, my expectations were once again proven wrong when I made my way into the actual center. I was greeted warmly, and looked around the room with interest when I was asked to

wait a moment for my appointment to begin. To my great relief, there was clearly no large cold room I'd be working in. Everything about the center was warm, from the smile of the supervisor behind her desk to the soft jazz music sighing into the air, from the pleasantly creamy walls to the padded chairs I waited on. The session was clearly designed for comfort, and my tutor was eager to help me feel secure in the new environment. As a result, I was able to overcome my deep anxiety of sharing my work and we were able to improve it together. Leaving Ray B. West that night, and walking out into the crisp spring sunset, I glowed. It was that night that I decided once and for all that Utah State University would be my new home once I graduated. It was also that night that I knew I wanted to work in the USU Writing Center.

While reading the "Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors" by Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli last summer, I was struck by the following opening anecdote: "To make apprehensive writers feel more comfortable, writing centers tend deliberately to project an inviting, relaxed atmosphere. Tutors reflect this ambience through their casual friendliness" (p. 1). My personal experience with the center suggested that the Ray B. West Writing Center met its objective beautifully, allowing me to overcome some of my own initial fears about showing my writing to others. As both a current tutor in the Writing Center and a future teacher, I firmly believe in the importance of establishing a safe and welcoming environment for students through affect, decoration, and organization.

The way in which a writing tutor presents themselves contributes greatly to the comfort of the visiting students. As the "Bedford Guide" notes, "tutors reflect [the relaxed] ambience through their casual friendliness" in an effort to promote students' comfort (p. 1). A combination of positivity, confidence, and flexibility are invaluable in helping students feel secure enough to share their work with others. Leading Psychologist Anita Woolfolk discusses these concepts in her book,

“Educational Psychology”. Woolfolk asserts that a tutor or teacher’s “sense of efficacy... [or] belief that he or she can reach even difficult students to help them learn... [is] one of the few personal characteristics... that predict student achievement” (p. 5). In other words, if a tutor has confidence in their ability to successfully help a student, the student will be better able to learn and be as open as the writing process requires.

Tutors can also help ease students’ nerves by admitting personal mistakes and helping the students view them as peers rather than unapproachable teachers. Students often admit to being intimidated when first visiting the center, so it is vital for the tutors to assure them that they are not perfect but are eager to help. Current U.S.U. Writing Center tutor Mikayla Doyle notes, “I remember being nervous [the first time I came] because... I was pretty sure that they knew everything about writing.... I understand now that tutors aren’t perfect. Really, they are just comfortable in their insecurities” (personal communication, November 30, 2017). Tutor confidence breeds student relaxation. Woolfolk also notes that positive relationships between students and teachers correlate strongly with student engagement and success (p. 7). Tutors are expected at various times to inspire, commiserate with, and encourage students (Ryan and Zimmerelli, p. 7). Each of these respective roles allows the student to feel at ease within the Writing Center and contributes to its overall sense of comfort.

Another facet of Writing Center ambience is the decor. “[Writing] centers are often furnished with plants, bright posters, [and] comfortable chairs” (Ryan and Zimmerelli, p. 11). Bela Arora, professor at the University of South Wales, notes, “a well-designed learning environment - one that considers all of the senses - can potentially increase levels of student creativity, productivity and well-being”. According to Arora’s research, brightly colored walls and natural

light increase student productivity and engagement. My own memories of classroom ambience often include color or the lack thereof. The Writing Center in Ray B. West makes effective use of a combination of bright and soothing colors. A warm shade of yellow welcomes students in the main reception area. Throughout the adjacent rooms, large windows fill the room with natural light and accents of lavender, brown, and green add mellow touches. Additionally, the combination of potted plants, exhibited paintings completed by U.S.U. students, and soft rolling chairs help the center feel homelike as opposed to a formal business. In my own experience, the careful attention to detail help nervous students unwind and calm frazzled nerves.

Another detailed aspect of a functional writing center is its layout. Effective organization works with the decor to project a soothing atmosphere for attendees. As “The Bedford Guide” notes, writing centers often employ tables instead of desks (pg. 11). This is certainly true of the writing centers at U.S.U. In fact, the Utah State University Writing Center Training Videos clearly address this phenomenon. Tutors are expected to sit beside the tutee because it helps the student feel less intimidated and understand that they are working with a peer as opposed to a teacher. Where students attending the WC are encouraged to have control in a session, the casual seating projects a nonverbal sense of common ground. Within writing centers, a student’s sense of confidence as opposed to powerless plays a role in their ability to engage effectively with the tutor. When a tutee feels comfortable taking charge in the session, they are better able to take charge of adjusting their paper as needed, strengthening their writing skills in the process (Ryan and Zimmerelli, p. 11).

At the end of the day, the color of a tutoring room matters much less than the intrinsic motivation of the student who has come to work within its walls. However, I argue that a student’s

level of comfort within a session is a determining factor in not only that session's potency but in the overall effectiveness of a writing center. Where the primary responsibility of a writer is to write, a good writing center's responsibility is to give them the confidence to do so. Writing centers reflect that end goal in their attention to positive tutor affect, soothing decor, and organization that empowers its visitors. In the end, a student's ability to express themselves and communicate effectively guides their path in life; great writers today become the leaders of tomorrow. Perhaps it would seem extreme to suggest that the padded chairs in a writing center change the world. After all, many papers discussed in a writing center's walls are forgotten about with time. However, I argue that the ambience of a learning environment can and does tweak the world every day. Do writing centers shape the course of history? They just might.

Reference list:

Arora, Bela. (2013). Why fifty shades of beige?. *Times Higher Education*, (2116), 24.

Ryan, Leigh and Zimmerelli, Lisa. (2016). *The bedford guide for writing tutors* (6th ed.).  
New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martin's.

U. S. U. Writing Center, The. ( 2017). *New Tutor Training Videos* [Linked videos]. Retrieved from  
U. S. U. Writing Center Canvas page. Web site:[https://usu.instructure.com/courses/310355/pages/new-tutor-training-videos?module\\_item\\_id=3026794](https://usu.instructure.com/courses/310355/pages/new-tutor-training-videos?module_item_id=3026794).

Woolfolk, Anita. (2017). *Educational psychology: active learning edition* (13th ed.).  
San Francisco, CA: Pearson.