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From Statia to School

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Abstract

This paper discusses how marginalized voices in the writing center and in the classroom can be heard. The atmosphere differences in the classroom and in the writing center contribute a great deal to the differences in communication that occur there. This paper does not define the term marginalization; basically, it refers to the exclusion that occurs because someone or a group of people are different than the people or group of people who are spear-heading the conversation. The paper begins with a personal story of marginalization and then moves into how marginalization takes places in academia. At the end of the paper, possible cures to marginalization are discussed. Those include: individuals speaking up and anonymous participation like surveys. Ultimately, marginalization is something that is nearly impossible to combat, but easy to accommodate and manipulate.

Keywords: marginalization, minorities, university, classroom, writing center

From Statia to School

When I lived on the tiny and inconsequential island of St. Eustatius, or Statia, in the West Indies, I stuck out like perfectly white egret bird standing on one leg in a murky African waterhole crowded with water buffalo eager to drink from, bathe in, and play around the water. I was a marginalized voice when I was too young to even understand the word “marginalized.” Being a white American on an island of black Caribs was not as difficult as I anticipated it being. I was very stressed about making friends, attending school in a different language, how to do the homework, what would happen to my friends at home in Utah. But I simply assimilated into the Caribbean culture; I learned their mixed language, I dressed like them, I ate with them, I danced with them, I went to school with them, and I dated them. I soon forgot my friends in Utah, and I flourished where I was stuck. But I was still marginalized because of the color of my skin and my cultural heritage. At times, I did not understand the conversations, or I was left confused at the language. Nevertheless, I brushed it off and continued to befriend the people and tried to fit in.

Now, I’m at a university getting a master’s degree and I don’t stick out so much. I embody that culture. I am privileged, I speak like an academic, I write like an academic, I am in a position of power as a writing instructor, I am respected and taken seriously (for the most part). Even though these privileges are present, because I am white and I am female, I am marginalized. In my adult life, I haven’t felt marginalized to a great deal but graduate school is a new beast and it has reared its ugly head and the feelings of marginalization are sometimes defeating. And I know I am not the only one. Even those who do not seem marginalized are marginalized.

During my first week in the graduate program, I called my father in tears and I explained that I was frustrated because I never got a chance to talk in my classes. I complained that the men were given priority over me when it came to making comments in class. I was beyond frustrated with this because I too wanted to share my two cents. My father told me something I'll never forget. He said, "The loud male PhD student in your grad seminar who name-drops and brings up fancy concepts without explaining them is not smarter than you." I took a deep breath, agreed with him, and we finished up our phone call. Those words have kept me from quitting nearly every single day.

Marginalization is an unfortunate reality that many people have to deal with. In the writing center and in the classroom, marginalization should be carefully avoided if possible. Of the ten students I have tutored in the writing center, all but two have been female. Of those females, four have been cultural minorities. Even in that small sample size, there are eight marginalized people. In my classroom, I have eight male students and fifteen female students. That's twice as many marginalized people as I've aided in the testing center. I have noticed in that in the writing center, there is a spot for those marginalized people and they are just as valued and appreciated as the unmarginalized people.

The writing center's feeling is palpably relaxed and fun while the classroom often feels tense and forced. As a graduate student, I split my time between the classroom as an instructor and as a tutor in the writing center. About three-quarters of the semester has gone by and I have observed the attitudes and I have felt the tension (or lack thereof) radiating off students both in the classroom and in one-on-one tutoring sessions. The differences are astounding. The students I aid in the writing center are much more relaxed than the students I teach in my 1010 class. They are also more forthcoming with comments, questions, and vocal participation.

The writing center is a place of inclusion. All who enter are welcome and appreciated. I have never seen anyone in there without a smile—students, tutors, and faculty alike. Whenever one of my fellow tutors walks in with a heavy burden, all of the tutors are out of their rooms and surrounding that person with love, encouragement, and care. I know that students feel that inclusion and love when they enter the writing center as well. The one-on-one arrangement of the writing center makes it very easy to have conversations that flow, dialogue that is productive, and occasionally tutors and their students become friends, even if it is just for twenty-five minutes. Voices are not marginalized in the writing center because there is not enough time or space for them to be marginalized.

On the other hand, in the classroom there is a great deal of tension. Students feel pressured by the instructor; they may feel awkward, tired, confused, and sometimes lost. These feelings cause self-marginalization. Because the students are not feeling 100% themselves, they shut down and very quickly become non-participatory. I have noticed that the classroom is a place where a lot of judgement, both good and bad, takes place. In my classroom, I do my best to curb any judgement I might have and leave it alone. It does no one any good to act upon harsh judgements. But my students are less thoughtful about it. They will outright say things that are not kind or not inclusive or not productive to the ongoing conversation. When I was an undergraduate student, I always felt like my comments weren't taken seriously or they weren't as thought-out as the comments of my male counterparts. I always felt left out of the conversation because I was female. Even the classroom conversations that discussed feminism and femininity left me feeling like an outsider. Thus, it could be that the females in my class don't share or speak up because they feel like the men will fight against everything they say and that will

discourage them from speaking out again. But, it could be that they are the type of students who sit back, listen to a lecture, take notes, and learn that way.

So, how can marginalized people overcome the seemingly insuperable barriers to communicate both in the classroom and in the writing center? Unfortunately, marginalization is not something that can be fixed overnight, nor can it be a permanent fix. Whenever anyone comes in from the margins to the center, someone else is kicked out to the margins. It is a cycle that likely will never end. Marginalization, although difficult to battle, can be fought against in the classroom especially. Anonymous surveys or *Kahoot!* games are great ways of including voices without the voices being identified. Some students thrive on anonymity while others strive to be spotlighted. By including various ways of participation in the classroom, those marginalized voices will creep slowly to the center once they gain the confidence necessary to proudly stand at the center of the conversation. Because of the one-on-one atmosphere of the writing center, this marginalization is not as obvious as it otherwise could be. The writing center and the classroom are wonderful spaces where the marginalized can have their voices heard. The writing center is an easier place than the classroom is, but both are still valuable spaces where voices can speak up where they otherwise would go unheard.