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## Learning on Equal Grounds

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## **Learning on Equal Grounds**

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### **Abstract**

Utah State University welcomes students to its beautiful campus where they can achieve their potential in an environment where everyone is welcome and each is promised that their voice will be heard and valued. The “Diversity Statement” facilitates this by encouraging discourse in a “free and respectful exchange of ideas.” Certainly, the opportunity to collaborate with students, scholars, and instructors in such an environment would help each gain command of the English language and improve their writing skills. As a graduate student, graduate instructor, and Writing Center tutor, I looked forward to this opportunity from many angles. Navigating my campus experience in my varying roles has helped me discover that all here are stakeholders in the university experience; each contributes to the success or failure of the learning environment. My pedagogy and practice have been informed by dynamics encountered in the Writing Center and classroom, that have highlighted the importance of this as I have studied education theory. Writing Center theory has ultimately been most influential to me in facilitating a free and safe environment through mutual thoughtfulness that enables the education process for all.

Keywords: Writing Center tutor, English 1010, teacher, learner, writing, tutoring, power differentials, freedom, emotional safety

### **Learning on Equal Grounds**

It still felt like summer as I crossed the large, freshly mowed quad to the Writing Center in the old Ray B. West building. I had been eagerly anticipating my first appointments as a tutor since the staff first presented their refined methodologies in pedagogy class. The vintage English building, its yellow bricks and paned windows, painted a classic picture. The Writing Center was described as a kind of heaven on campus. From my observations so far, I was convinced it was. Tutors met students with warm welcomes and chatting. A basket of fruit or candy on the corner of the supervisor's desk was for sharing. The supervisor would introduce the student to their tutor who gently guided writers to identify where their work could grow and what revisions could clarify their messages. In this safe space, one individual at a time, tutoring empowered writers. At that moment I hoped to facilitate such an experience. Looking back to that moment, I had no idea yet the mountain of work I would face to make this pedagogy my practice.

As I reached the stairs of the RBW, the building's crumbling stairs, tarnished door handles and high gloss wooden stair rails reminded me to treat its occupants with tenderness. I descended to the first-floor lab down the hall, my excitement laced with a bit of anxiety. I was experiencing what my first-time Writing Center attendees surely would! I held on to the kindness I had seen in class, and soon received a warm greeting from the Writing Center staff that melted my worry away. In a moment, the heaven of the Writing Center had already worked its magic on me. The supervisor directed me to my desk in "Narnia," the office across the hall. Large, paned windows stood above my desk and light from the sun danced as the leaves outside tossed in the breeze. I breathed deep and sat down. Tapping out my credentials on the keyboard to sign-in, the supervisor popped her head in the doorway, announced my first student's name, and asked if I was ready. By now, I couldn't wait.

Welcoming the student, I pulled a chair out for them and noticed their relief as I assessed their comfort level. “Is this your first time in the writing center? What brings you here?” We glided into the part where the student identified their needs through open-ended questions that I formulated as they described their assignment. I searched to know how to engage the student’s reflection and revision abilities. Quickly, I learned that the writing center training I received had masterfully equipped me with simple, doable approaches that brought effective results. The student thanked me for what they felt was “just what they needed” from my tutoring, and the words of our training manual came to mind: it is important to develop “people skills—the ability to empathize, and to adapt and respond appropriately to each individual writer’s situation” (Ryan & Zimmerelli 4).

Between tutoring sessions I considered how mentoring writing could inform my pedagogy for teaching English 1010. I felt that the theory on creating atmosphere in the Writing Center could be duplicated. I didn’t know it at the time, but the next two hours of my day would drive home the meaning of the Writing Center theory and create my resolve to practice it.

At 10:20 am, I completed my shift at the Writing Center and walked down the hall, floating a bit from the lift that tutoring had produced in me. As I approached the practicum classroom, I became, once again, the student, and starkly aware of a fellow tutor’s voice pouring out the doorway. I heard, “...there’s no room in this discussion for me, a straight, white, religious, middle-class male,” referring to the academic article we had read that week that attempted to define, and justify responses to, power differentials. This exchange strung despair as a bunting across the room that hung for the duration of class that day. My ribs trembled and I worked to muster courage to engage in the discussion. Social understanding became my focus, stifling my ability to comprehend the material. I couldn’t wait for it to end.

It did, with a bang. The visiting instructor addressed the class through a question asked by that same student by telling him that he should feel privileged he could even ask questions. The class sat silenced, their loyalties in friendship and professional connection challenged. The instructor concluded as they confessed they were using their position of power to avoid hearing comments they didn't want to accept, directing the class discussion as it pleased them.

The tension my associates and I experienced in the classroom had not ended with the bell. That week I listened as some of my peers discussed how difficult studying had become under the new strain. I also struggled to complete an essay, so I turned to our writing center text, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. Under "Student Concerns" I was surprised to find familiar consequences that charged exchanges produce. It read, "If you have ever tried to write a paper after a fight with your parents or a close friend, when you are ... coping with a difficult roommate, then you know that writing can be influenced by factors in your life other than school" (Ryan & Zimmerelli 55). Certainly, the assertive and belittling approach we experienced had inhibited learning. I felt consoled in my struggles, and considered dialogue that would honor the thoughts of others in class as Writing Center tutors do in sessions.

Not long later, the 1010 practicum readings introduced us to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He described teachers as students, and students as teachers, something the Writing Center practiced. I agreed with Freire. He said, "The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them;" that subjecting others to control imposed by the teacher is necrophilic, "nourished by love of death, not life" (77). Our experience verified this truth. We needed to realize we were knowledge-making as we analyzed the feelings our teacher sparked. As teachers and students, we occupy kariotic spaces mutually, both informing their effectiveness as we learn our needs and how to meet them.

Although navigating power differentials is challenging, because of my teaching role, I decided to be the forerunner in the classroom in creating a safe learning environment where students (and I) could achieve our potential. I begin class with a writing journal prompt that allows students to reflect within their own mental space. I hold one-on-one conferences early, and include think-pair-share into my lessons daily.

Bell Hooks' article entitled, "Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory" helped me put words to what I experienced as a Writing Center tutor and I established ground rules for interaction in the classroom in hopes of achieving her results. She said, "Open, honest communication is the most important way we maintain relationships ... It is as vital as the sharing of resources." I teach students that each has a responsibility in this effort to understand one another; that in doing so we would access "[the] most powerful resource any of us can have as we study and teach in university settings[, a] full understanding and appreciation of the richness, beauty, and primacy of our familial and community backgrounds" (110). The Writing Center tutors see needs in others around us as Hooks did, as a constant, informative tool that has transformative power that "enriches our intellectual experience." According to Hooks, education is a "practice of freedom." I discovered that people do become unified, they don't reject each other, and lives are enriched with this mindset (110). In order to accomplish the English 1010 outcomes, I could not afford to challenge students with harmful power differentials, labels and class distinctions. I knew they would struggle to secure their emotional safety as I once did if I didn't model understanding ways.

At the end of a writing unit mid-semester I asked my students what outcomes they felt our class produced so far. They reported that they were interacting with each other productively in the classroom, and navigating their lives with greater confidence. Those who had been to the

writing center praised their experience. After I dismissed them, I walked across the quad in the direction I had on my first day of tutoring. I was headed to the Writing Center again; it was my turn to be tutored. As I thought about my students' responses, I recalled a comment that one of my peers had made after that difficult class, "Why can't we walk down the street together and be friends?" My class had accomplished this. With each step I took toward the old Ray B. West building, I felt the fluid transition from teacher to student and relished the peace I would feel when I was relieved by the help of a tutor who would guide me see what I couldn't see without them.

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