

# Changing Notions of Difference in the Writing Center: The Possibilities of Universal Design

by Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz

## *The Problem: The Divide Between Theory and Practice*

Like most writing center directors, we have always included in our tutor preparation an emphasis on differences students may bring to a session. Up until a few years ago, this approach mainly took the form of a unit on working with ESL writers and another on working with students who have learning disabilities. This approach to diversity was reinforced by the textbooks we chose for our tutor training seminar. The guides for tutors that we have assigned over the years (including Meyer and Smith's *The Practical Tutor*, Capossela's *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring*, McAndrew and Reigstad's *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*, and Gillespie and Lerner's *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*) tended to include chapters or sections on ESL students and on students with disabilities, as did the collections of essays we used (Murphy and Law's *Landmark Essays on Writing Centers*; Barnett and Blumner's *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*). Each year, we supplemented the textbooks with additional readings and with presentations from guest speakers. Tutors seemed eager to explore these topics, and we typically spent significant class time discussing sample papers by and sessions with ESL writers and students with disabilities.

These units tied in with our broader discussions of the role of our writing center in supporting multiculturalism. For our unit on ESL writers, we introduced Carol Severino's framework, considering whether and when the tutor's position should be assimilationist, accommodationist, or separatist. This approach provided a natural

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transition to a discussion of our writing center's stance regarding other students whose ideas and practices of literacy, for a variety of reasons, don't match their professors' expectations. This issue is framed by Marilyn Cooper (in a way that's very accessible to peer tutors) in "Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers" and is explored in depth within a postmodern theoretical framework by Nancy Grimm in *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*.

But as we read the tutors' weekly journal entries,<sup>1</sup> we often felt disappointed. Despite the preparation, we found that we still had tutors who didn't undertake this work with the sensitivity toward difference we expected. For example, we got this journal entry from Sally:

I had a session yesterday that was frustrating for me on many levels. To begin with, when Seth walked in I immediately recognized him as this student that had been really rude to me when I was working at the Reserve Desk. I decided to put that aside though....I tried to make small talk, but he just sort of stared at me blankly. Maybe he is just shy or has bad social skills, I thought.

The whole session just felt uncomfortable to me from that point on....looking back, it really felt like it was mostly me going through his paper and pointing out grammar mistakes....He would just sort of stare at me while I explained what they were....I don't know if he just really had no idea or he just wanted me to correct all his stuff for him, because he would just sort of stare at his paper....

After a certain point I just wanted him out of there. I felt like he kept staring at me....Some mistakes to me just smacked of laziness—like he would misspell a word in one sentence and the next sentence would have it spelled correctly....It did occur to me that he might have a learning disability...he had to sound out some of his words really slowly.

We later had the opportunity to see a draft written by Seth, which was filled with paragraphs similar to the following:

I remember my bar miztepha. I was supposed to be starting my jouney on the path to manhood but had no idea how to begin. I flet that the entire things was a sham. Even while I was surrounded by all these people waiting for me to begin I was completely and totally alone. I had no one to show me the way. It was hard work and I felt that there was a huge area of my life that was missing. I proceed to give the audice

what they wanted and read out loud in Hebrew but I felt disappointed in myself as if something was missing but I was not sure what.,

My father abused me severely. I suppose that I should start with him. Constantly yelling and criticism towards everything that I did. The first relationship I had was a total disaster.

We were shocked. After all that reading and class discussion, how did Sally have any doubt that this student had a learning disability? More importantly, why didn't she connect this possibility with Seth's staring, lack of social skills, spelling difficulties, and inability to grasp punctuation rules?

Another example: when doing some follow-up training on working with ESL students, we asked tutors to consider several papers written by ESL writers, including "The Best Storyteller Ever," the first draft of a personal essay written for a composition class. In this sample paragraph from the essay, Lam, a first-year student from a Vietnamese family, uses irony, humor, and figurative language to begin to create an affectionate portrait of his mother as story-teller:

My mom of all the people in the world tells story like no one does. These stories always hold meanings in them, which many times I wish and hope that they would have deeper meaning but they don't. My mom didn't have as much education as I do so, when she tells story she tell them straight like a middle school student. It's just solid, right to the point of the matter. Never were there little paths or circles that make your mind spins. There are no hidden symbols or deep thoughts. Her stories are like the yellow brick road that leads Dorothy to her goal. It's just straight forward, no foreshadow no double meaning and certainly no propaganda in them. We can tell now that my mom is no good storyteller. But she tells story to me all the times. I guess she thinks that I am her loyal fan because I am one of a few people out of her life that have to listen to it.

Chris, one of our best tutors, offered this analysis of the paper:

It is not quite clear what point the student is trying to make, the content is unclear, and the paragraphs are not cohesive. I'm not really sure if the student is making fun of his mother, or if he is serious. Does he really mean his mother is a good storyteller, or does he just mean that his mother is good at giving lectures. Oftentimes in a personal essay the "mistakes" an ESL student makes in his or her writing strengthens the piece and adds to its authenticity. However, this piece is relatively generic and does not immediately address the student's cultural back-

ground and heritage. Therefore, I would suggest that the student follow the conventions of standard English as closely as possible.

We were mystified. After the preparation described above, which included a chapter from Helen Fox's *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing*, how could Chris have taken the essay so literally, missing the subtleties of its tone and intent? And how could she think that a personal essay by a Vietnamese student about how his mother tells stories is "generic," having nothing to do with his cultural background?

### *Current/Traditional Approaches to Issues of Difference in Tutor Preparation*

Journal entries such as these led us to consider that perhaps there was a problem with our approach. In considering learning disabilities and whether English is a student's first language as "special cases" or "differences," were we implicitly suggesting, despite our rhetoric, that as a group, we tutors represented the "norm"—and that our role was to help "them" become like "us"? If so, was this sub-text undercutting our overt purpose of *increasing* sensitivity to and support for a variety of literacies, making our tutor preparation counter-productive?

We decided to look more closely at how these topics were covered in our course texts. We noticed that the authors of textbooks for tutors almost uniformly began their discussions of working with ESL writers and students with disabilities with a warning about the dangers of generalizing, warnings that had made us feel comfortable with their approaches. For example, Capossela begins Chapter 11, entitled "Specific Kinds of Writers," by confessing that "[i]t is essential for a consultant to remember that each writer is different. In view of this fact, I felt ambivalent as I wrote this chapter, since it assumes similarities between writers who belong to a particular group" (92). Gillespie and Lerner begin their section "What if...You suspect the Writer Might Have a Learning Disability (LD)" with this qualification:

Learning disabilities manifest themselves in many forms and have a wide range of severity. So it's hard to make generalizations about a single way to proceed. Nevertheless, the basic tutoring principles of careful listening and observing and being sensitive to the writer's specific needs apply with LD writers, just as they do with all writers. (169-170)

The advice all of these authors go on to give is often very sensitive to the dangers of stereotyping and over-generalizing. Gillespie and Lerner organize their chapter on working with non-native speakers by exploring some of the myths connected with these writers. McAndrew and Reigstad offer brief discussions of such

topics as contrastive rhetoric, behavior patterns, teaching patterns, and World ESL students.

However, in all of these textbooks, as in our own class, this explicit sensitivity and positioning are then somewhat subverted. The assumption of these chapters is almost always that the student writer, not the tutor, is the ESL student or has the learning disability, suggesting that such differences disqualify a student from being a tutor. In addition, these groups of writers are often overtly marked as being "different." In Capossela, they are considered in a chapter on "Specific Kinds of Writers"; in McAndrew and Reigstad in a chapter entitled "Tutoring Different People"; and in Gillespie and Lerner, tutoring students with learning disabilities is covered in the "What If..." chapter along with a host of other problematic situations, including, "The Paper is All Marked Up," "The Grade On A Writer's Paper Seems Unfair," "The Writer Has Plagiarized," "You Find The Writer's Point Of View Offensive," "The Paper Is Due Soon!" and "The Writer Is Crying."

Furthermore, despite the opening qualifications, the textbooks often go on to suggest a standard approach to working with ESL students. Capossela includes a six-step "Format to follow with ESL Writers." Gillespie and Lerner offer general advice, often from Marquette tutors, such as "Ask [NNS] students questions in order for us to better understand them: 'What do you feel like you have the most trouble with?'" (120). McAndrew and Reigstad suggest "Be Positive: Tutors should create rapport by discussing a particular feature of the ESL writer's work early on in the tutoring process" (100).

What about the articles we were asking students to read? The article most commonly anthologized on working with students with disabilities, included in every collection we selected for the class, is Julie Neff's "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center." Here we also saw evidence that students with disabilities were being portrayed as "other." For example, Neff opens her article by creating a picture of the collaborative writing conference, and then says, "But one group of students does not and cannot fit into this pedagogical picture: students with learning disabilities," as if students with disabilities can't collaborate. Her advice to ask "*seemingly obvious* questions" to generate ideas or "*simple* questions" (emphasis ours) to come up with a thesis, seems to belie what she says elsewhere about the intelligence of students with disabilities. And in often referring to students with disabilities as "these students," in one instance contrasting them with "the normal learner," she seems to create an "us and them" view of writing tutors and their tutees with disabilities.

One of the readings commonly anthologized about working with ESL writers is Judith K. Powers' "Rethinking Writing Center Conferencing Strategies for the ESL Writer." Powers describes a specific situation faced by the University of Wyoming Writing Center, and yet statements such as "ESL writers...seldom come to the writing center conference with any substantial background in writing and writing instruction in English" or references to them as "educated writers of their own languages" show the tendency to generalize about a hugely varied group of writers. Another widely anthologized essay is Anne DiPardo's "'Whispers of Coming and Going': Lessons from Fannie," which carefully considers the complexity of how and why Morgan, an African-American tutor, fails to connect with or provide much help to Fannie, a Navajo student. Unfortunately, what many of our tutors take away from this article is not the need for "respectful curiosity" in considering a student's literacy background, but rather a need to defend the tutor Morgan, who they feel has been critiqued for trying to employ the practices learned in her training.

### *Focusing on Identity Rather Than Difference*

Suspecting that the ways we and the course texts framed the study of "difference" might actually be encouraging the "othering" of many students, we decided to redesign our tutor preparation. Rather than focusing on those who bring "differences" to the tutoring session, we would explore how *all* of us, directors, tutors, and tutees alike, bring aspects of our identity to tutoring and how these various aspects might shape a session. Indeed, McAndrew and Reigstad begin to make this same shift in their discussion of "Tutoring Different People." They present "differences" as aspects of identity possessed by both tutor and tutee:

However varied the settings for tutoring writing may be, nothing is more varied than the people who tutor and are tutored. This chapter looks at factors that interact to form a large portion of the interpersonal and instructional context for all tutoring sessions: ability as a writer; gender; experience with mainstream English language and American culture; learning disabilities; and personality and learning styles. The chapter then discusses how these factors affect tutoring and suggests strategies for improving the effectiveness of tutoring sessions *where one or more of the factors are present* [italics ours]. (89)

However, by suggesting that such factors are present only in some sessions, they reinforce the view of these factors as differences. Moreover, their approach to each aspect of identity is so cursory that the chapter does little to encourage self-

reflection, with about a page devoted to “Learning Disabled Writers” and two pages to “Multicultural and ESL Writers and Tutors.” The rest of the book is not organized around and does not encourage self-reflection on identity. We suspect that many directors using this textbook follow the same approach we describe in our introduction, assigning this chapter only in connection with units focusing on ESL writers and students with disabilities.

Barron and Grimm also describe using an approach to diversity that focuses on identity in their article “Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center: Stories and Lessons from Two Beginners.” Noting that race is an aspect of diversity that had been neglected in the Michigan Tech tutor preparation program, Grimm describes how she and Nancy Barron changed their program to focus attention on “the ways that race affects literacy practices” (62). Grimm learns from her attempts to have a conversation about race with her tutors that the place to begin in developing greater sensitivity is through self-reflection on how her own identity has been shaped by race, advice she encountered in Helen Fox’s *“When Race Breaks Out”: Conversations about Race and Racism in College Classrooms*:

Engaging in this process with our coaches taught me that I, too, was unprepared to enter conversations about racial diversity....Although at this point I cannot recommend a particularly apt time or method for introducing race as a topic of writing center training, this experience has taught me how important it is to start with my own stories rather than assume that the histories written by and about *Others* will do the job for me. (64-65)

In changing our approach to diversity from a focus on difference to a focus on identity, we began as McAndrew and Reigstad and Barron and Grimm all suggest: by recruiting tutors who have as part of their identity some of the aspects we had previously considered “different.” In a visible way, this made the “others” we read about as potential tutees part of “ourselves,” the group of tutors. Concerned not to again contradict our overt purpose by making these students spokespersons for a group, we never called attention to those aspects of their identity and never called on them to speak when these topics were discussed in class unless they volunteered. But when the speaker from our disabilities office came to class, two of the tutors, Emily and Caitlin, quickly chimed in with descriptions of the difficulties they themselves had had learning to write because of dyslexia. As each described her particular disability, it became apparent how difficult it is to generalize: one had difficulties with spelling and punctuation, while the other had trouble with retrieving and articulating her ideas. A few other tutors joined in, talking about family members or

friends with disabilities, and the class ended up comparing notes on the services available for testing and accommodations in public schools in various parts of the country. This was a much different discussion from that of the previous year, when several tutors had questioned whether providing accommodations to students with disabilities is fair.

Similarly, when in class a tutor mentioned his struggle with a tutee who is a non-native speaker of English, Limin turned the issue around by speaking about the struggles she experienced as a tutor whose first language is Chinese, feeling that some students doubted her ability to help them when they heard her speak English with an accent. Another tutor, Matilde, whose first language is Bosnian and second language is German, chose for one of the writing assignments to create some hand-outs for our Center, explaining various aspects of English grammar and usage to non-native speakers. During her class presentation, some of the other tutors realized that she knew more about English grammar than they did. And when late in the year Matilde mentioned that she was finding herself thinking in German (her major) rather than in English, they began to see her not as an ESL speaker with language issues but rather as a person with many linguistic accomplishments.

In addition to changing our recruiting practices, we began assigning readings that explore aspects of identity from the point of view of the tutor as well as the tutee, which led to self-reflection about identity in journal entries and class discussions. A key article is the one by Barron and Grimm referred to above, which serves as a springboard to considerations of how race may shape sessions. For example, Sally, the same tutor who earlier was so frustrated by Seth's staring, considers in her journal how race may shape her own and the tutee's reading and writing of a text. Her tutee is writing about colonialism in Antigua in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*. The student disagrees with critics who find Kincaid "too angry"; in fact, she acknowledges, her own anger made it hard to write the paper. In the session, Sally's response had been, "I think any rational person would be angered by this." Later, reflecting in her journal, she says "I realize my anger is more anger on principle—her anger could come from a deeper place, from the real experience of being someone who isn't white in a world that automatically grants white privilege." She goes on:

How this affected the writing of her paper came out in subtle ways. When she got to the conclusion that race was at the heart of the class system in Antigua, she wrote something like, "It's obvious that race was the factor...." I wonder if white students reading the book would have



come to that conclusion before Kincaid spells it out—if it would have been obvious to them.

Another key article is Jay Sloan's "Ethical Issues," which explores a gay tutor's complicated responses to a tutee who announces, "I'm going to write on the sin of homosexuality." This article opens the door for tutors and for us to consider (and share our concerns about) how sexual identity and religion may shape a tutoring session. Aaron responded with a journal entry beginning,

This reading hit home for me. I deeply appreciated every word of "Ethical Issues," by Sloan. I liked it because it is the very fear that I, as well, have in tutoring.... This haunts me during many sessions. I worry: *what if the tutee is homophobic? And, worse, what if he knows I am gay?* Not that I disavow my sexuality, or anything - in fact, I am completely open with it at UVM - but The Writing Center is not a place to *judge* one's character; it is not even a place to judge one's writing: it is a place to collaborate on writing.

While in the process of writing this article, we have added to our tutor preparation several readings that encourage tutors to approach difference through exploring their own identity, such as William Macauley's "Paying Attention to Learning Styles in Writing Center Epistemology, Tutor Training, and Writing Tutorials"; Nancy Welch's "The Return of the Suppressed: Tutoring Stories in a Transitional Space," which prompts tutors to examine how their own assumptions and identities are shaping the stories they tell of sessions; and Bruce and Rafoth's *ESL Writers: A Guide For Writing Center Tutors*, which begins,

Tutoring ESL students is one of the most rewarding aspects of working in a writing center, but it can also be one of the most challenging. That's because a tutoring session is never limited to the student's text. Instead, it extends into the cultures of the tutor, the writer, and the institution, often revealing new values and perspectives. (xiii)

In addition to changing our recruitment practices and reading list, we encouraged more formal writing involving self-reflection about identity and tutoring. When asked to create a draft of an article on some aspect of tutoring, several tutors chose to explore aspects of their own identity. Aaron, for example, wrote about how socio-economic class may shape his tutoring. He poses the questions, "Does my own socio-economic background cause me to interact differently with students of other socio-economic backgrounds?" and "If it does, is this a good or a bad thing?" Aaron ponders too whether he can use his own anxiety disorder to relate to other students' anxieties about their papers.

Carey Groleau considered how her own patterns of communication based on gender affect her interactions with male and female tutees. She had been frustrated by how male tutees, as opposed to female tutees, responded to questions such as: "Do you see what I'm saying here?" or "Does this make sense?" To explain this frustration, her paper draws on readings encountered in her Women's Studies classes that suggest women use minimal responses to encourage the speaker, while men tend to use them to communicate agreement. Carey notes too that she positions herself differently with male and female students. She finds that with male students, she takes a more authoritative position, "one that mimics my perception of authority in my relationships with men I am not close to." When she tutors women, "the boundaries are less clear. We are both sitting together looking at the same writing, offering equally qualified statements, participating in a more casual conversation, and with this comes a softening of the 'correctness or incorrectness' of questions, answers, even the paper itself." Carey presented her ideas at the NCPTW/IWCA conference in Hershey. We now use her article as an assigned reading in our tutor preparation class, where it has inspired other tutors and us to consider how gender shapes our sessions.

In a third example, Laura Siegel wrote about tutoring deaf students, which formed the basis of a presentation at the 2005 Conference of the Northeast Writing Centers Association. Laura's work had a profound impact on the class but especially on Melanie, another tutor who attended the conference. In her journal, Melanie calls the trip "a crash course in deaf awareness" as she laughs at herself for offering Laura headphones and providing a verbal morning wake-up call. Melanie realizes that she has "a lot to learn and to take into consideration" not only in sessions with deaf students, but also when working with writers with learning disabilities, with ESL students, with all students: "The truth is that I assume so much and many times do not voice what I'm thinking—thus leaving no room for the necessary corrections to be made." She vows to work especially hard in "tutoring sessions where a lot is decided on my tact and grasp of the student's position (academically, in life, etc.). How I go about that change remains unclear to me, but knowing that it needs to be done is half of the battle, right?"

Like Melanie, other tutors, over time, began generalizing about how issues of identity shape their sessions. Jason came to the realization that although both tutor and writer bring differences to a session, creating a way for them to interact is the tutor's responsibility: "It is good to know these differences exist so we, as tutors, can be as open to a person's style of interaction as possible. Really, I think that's what it comes down to: being able to find a way to interact with a person that may have

much different ideas as to how interaction should take place, and to be open and accommodating to their differences.” And Caitlin became aware of how her own identity limits her perceptions of sessions. Notice her reversal in the excerpt below:

In terms of race, I haven’t noticed that influencing the way any of my sessions have gone. Although, I don’t believe that I’ve had that racially diverse of tutees so it’s somewhat difficult to make that assertion knowing that I really don’t have too much base for comparison. Although I know that I wouldn’t be uncomfortable tutoring a person of any race or gender, that doesn’t mean that they will be comfortable with me tutoring them. It’s strange, but the more I think about both these topics (gender and race) I realize that I view all of my sessions through my own lens. I look at the session as I perceive it and often forget to try and look at it through the tutee’s eyes. Now that I’m beginning to realize this, I feel as though when I reflect on my sessions I’m often missing a big chunk of the story.

Through the process of writing this entry, it occurs to Caitlin that, because of who she is, she may have an entirely different experience and interpretation of a session than the student does, that her own experience of a situation doesn’t constitute its reality.

### *Addressing Identity Through Universal Design*

This new approach suggests tutees aren’t the only ones bringing “differences” to a session, and that aspects of identity brought by both tutor and tutee become factors that shape literacy practices in both the session itself and in the writing being considered. Rather than being ignored, erased, or corrected, differences in literacy practices on the part of both tutor and tutee can be recognized, acknowledged, examined, and, when appropriate, incorporated into the session and into the writing.

However, we noticed that all of this attention to identity left some tutors feeling overwhelmed. “How,” they asked, “can we make any practical use of all that we have learned when working with a writer only once (or even a couple of times)? Are we supposed to approach every student, in every session, thinking about the complex interaction between our own and the writer’s learning and composing styles, communication preferences, and literacy practices, and about how each of these have been shaped by culture, race, class, gender, and sexuality?” At first, we offered easy answers. We reminded them that there is no recipe for an effective session. We encouraged them to follow their instincts while in the midst of a session and reflect

later on how aspects of identity may have shaped the session. With time and practice, we assured them, considerations of identity would weave themselves naturally into their tutoring.

This year, our work in connection with students with disabilities has led us to consider a more concrete and practical approach to dealing with issues of identity in tutoring sessions, an approach based on the concept of Universal Design. When Laurel Cameron, a disabilities specialist from our ACCESS office, came to speak to the training class, she encouraged tutors *not* to think of how they might adapt their tutoring for students with disabilities. She explained that all students come to sessions with a variety of differences, and so what tutors do with a student with a disability should be no different from what they do with any other student. What Laurel was proposing, though she didn't use the term with the tutors, was applying the concept of Universal Design to tutoring writing.

Universal Design is an approach advocating for the design of products and services so that they are suited to a broad range of users. The seven principles of Universal Design were developed at the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University by a group including architects, engineers, and product designers. Their webpage "Universal Design Education On-line" explains that "Universal Design is an approach to the design of all products and environments to be as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability or situation....Universal design is not a fad or a trend but an enduring design approach that originates from the belief that the broad range of human ability is ordinary, not special." As examples of Universal Design, they cite building entrances without stairs and volume controls on public telephones ("About Universal Design").

While their website is a wonderful source for information on Universal Design in general, more specific information about the application of Universal Design in instructional settings can be found through the University of Connecticut's Center on Postsecondary Education and Development, which received a three-year federal grant to develop Universal Design for Instruction, or UDI. As their website explains, "By anticipating a variety of needs, ages, abilities and disabilities, planners embrace the notion of diversity as an essential element of their work" (Scott, McGuire, and Embry, *UDI Factsheet*). The hope is that through seeing diversity as an essential element of course design rather than an add-on, instruction can be planned from the start to meet the needs of a wide range of users, thus reaching more students more effectively and requiring fewer accommodations for individuals.

In their Factsheet, Scott, McGuire, and Embry go on to clarify that Universal Design is not the same as taking a “one-size-fits-all” approach to instruction; rather, “[t]he word universal refers to a flexible design that is specifically created to be used in diverse ways.” They also make the case that Universal Design in Instruction benefits not just students with disabilities: “One of the important aspects of UD is that its inclusive elements benefit all users.” Some of the examples of Universal Design for Instruction they cite include the “[u]se of web-based courseware products with links to on-line supports and resources so all students can access materials as needed regardless of varying academic preparation, need for review of content, distance from campus, etc.,” the “provision of a grading rubric for papers or projects to clearly lay out expectations for performance,” and “structuring a long-term course project so that students have the option of turning in individual project components separately for constructive feedback and for integration into the final product” (Scott, Shaw, and McGuire, “Examples of UDI”).

Scott, Shaw, and McGuire add two principles to the original seven developed at North Carolina State University, giving us nine Principles of Universal Design for Instruction that are described on their “Principles of UDI” webpage (Universal Design for Instruction: A New Paradigm). These principles are intended to “provide a framework for college faculty to use when designing or revising instruction to be responsive to diverse student learners and to minimize the need for ‘special’ accommodations and retrofitted changes to the learning environment” (UDI Factsheet). By extension, these nine principles can provide writing centers with a framework for directors to use in designing their Centers and their tutor preparation to be responsive to diverse tutors and tutees.

### *Using Universal Design as a Framework for Writing Centers*

Individualized instruction has long been a hallmark of writing center pedagogy; Universal Design suggests a different approach: developing design principles for conducting all sessions that make them accessible to the widest audience possible, reducing the need to treat any writer as having “special needs.” How can the nine principles of Universal Design help us develop practices that make it unnecessary to consider or treat any writer as “different”? In this next section, we hope to illustrate the power of Universal Design by using the nine principles to assess and redesign the University of Vermont (UVM) Writing Center.

#### **Universal Design and Tutoring Praxis**

Four of the principles relate to tutoring praxis. Through reflecting on our tutor preparation and practices in connection with these principles, we have been able to

develop better answers to our tutors' questions about how to bring into tutoring sessions their growing awareness of the many complex aspects of identity that shape literacy practices.

**Simple and intuitive:** *Instruction is designed in a straightforward and predictable manner, regardless of the student's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Eliminate unnecessary complexity.* The terms "simple," "straightforward," and "predictable" hardly describe most writing center sessions. All of our tutor preparation devoted to "difference" is focused on helping tutors understand the many complexities involved in tutoring. Is there a universal design approach to a session that is simple and straightforward but that allows some of these complexities to unfold?

When we discussed the idea of Universal Design for writing centers in class, tutor Eric Wright (who happens himself to have a disability) noted that he always begins his sessions by asking, "Before we get started, is there anything else you'd like me to know?" He explains,

in my experience this seems to work well. Students who feel the need to alert me to preferences based on learning style or disability can do so. Those who'd rather keep things private can do so. Of course, some people who want to volunteer such information don't at that time, being shy or whatever, but sometimes it comes out later in the session.

This has also resulted in some surprising responses. Some people have told me straight up that they don't care how well the paper turns out, they just want to pass and get it done with, some have told me they're having a bad day, not feeling well, etc—all good stuff to know. My favorite response was, "Hurry up, *American Idol* starts in an hour."

Always good to know where priorities are when setting an agenda.

We wonder if Eric's opening question might serve as a design approach to identity issues that could be incorporated into all sessions. Of course, as Eric points out, some students may choose not to share information with a stranger. A follow-up question that is less personal might be, "Have you worked with a tutor before?" If the student replies yes, the tutor can go on to ask what worked or didn't work for the student in those sessions. If the student replies no, the tutor can ask what ideas the student has for how they might best work together. This approach allows tutors to tap into knowledge students often have but aren't encouraged to share about learning styles, literacy attitudes and practices, and communication preferences, such as the helpfulness of having the tutor write or type the ideas generated by the student. A third question might be, "Tell me more about how you usually go about

writing papers, and what parts are easy for you and what parts are difficult,” thus encouraging a writer to share information about how aspects of identity shape her or his composing style and writing strengths and weaknesses.

Asking these three questions of all students—an initial invitation to share anything the student thinks relevant to the session, followed by more specific questions about the student’s tutoring preferences and writing process—can help eliminate guesswork on the tutor’s part about how aspects of identity may be shaping the session, requires no one to directly use the language of identity or difference, and at the same time gives every student the opportunity to share, and tutors to listen for, information that will help the tutor decide what approaches and strategies might work best for that individual.

**Flexibility in use:** *Instruction is designed to accommodate a wide range of individual abilities. Provide choice in methods of use.* Offering writers multiple strategies for all stages of the writing process is a standard part of writing center pedagogy. However, our tutors don’t receive much training in the software and adaptive technologies that might prove useful to a wide range of students, such as *Kurzweil 3000*, which can be used to transform written text into spoken text, or *Inspiration*, which is designed to help students use visual thinking to organize material. *Inspiration* provides a structure for creating maps or webs of ideas, and then translates those webs into an outline that provides a linear structure for the writer. Many offices at our University mention this software, including our Center for Teaching and Learning and our ACCESS office, but we have yet to incorporate it into our tutor preparation and writing center pedagogy.

**Tolerance for error:** *Instruction anticipates variation in individual student learning pace and prerequisite skills.* Writing center pedagogy is founded on the idea that the learning pace and prerequisite skills of students will vary. However, as we illustrated at the beginning of this article through the examples of Sally and Chris, our tutors often have difficulty making connections between class discussions of difference and the writing they encounter in sessions, and often assume students bring to sessions a background similar to their own unless presented with direct evidence to the contrary. Principle 5 suggests that we need to explicitly discuss and offer tutors practice in viewing “error” as possibly connected with identity in a variety of ways. By discussing tutoring sessions, sample papers, and mock scenarios, they can practice considering alternative explanations for what seem to be “problems”: considering that the student who seems uninterested in learning the rules for punctuation may be unable to “see” how punctuation functions in a sentence and may have uncomfortable associations with having his mistakes pointed out; that a writer’s

“weak” thesis may be modeled after the type of thesis she learned to write in high school; that the male writer who seems unwilling to participate in the session may feel uncomfortable with the approach used by a female tutor.

**A community of learners:** *The instructional environment promotes interaction and communication among students and between students and faculty.* While “creating community” is one aim of most writing centers, many scholars have explored the inherent hierarchy in tutoring (most notably John Trimbur in “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?”). This principle of Universal Design suggests one strategy for pushing against this hierarchy. While our tutor preparation surrounding identity stresses self-awareness and “respectful curiosity” toward student writers, we had never directly suggested to tutors that they make an effort to share aspects of their own identity with a student. For example, if a student is going to read aloud and the tutor is a visual learner, s/he might ask, “Could I look on?” explaining “I need to see a text to understand it—if I just listen to you I won’t remember much.” Or if tutors learned English as a second language, they might share with tutees their own frustrations with the idiosyncrasies of English spelling. By bringing some aspect of their own identity into a session, tutors can keep the “sharing” from being one-sided, creating a more equitable and genuine sense of community.

Tutors can also learn to draw on aspects of their identity that place them in a subordinate position in order to engage with writers on a more equal footing. We were introduced to such an exercise at two workshops: one at the University of Vermont led by the Rev. Dr. Jamie Washington, who is well known for his diversity training in educational and business settings, and another at the 2006 NEWCA Conference, led by Harry Denny and Leon Marcelo, entitled “De/Facing the Center: Toward a Critical Awareness of Identity Politics and Writing Center Practice and Personnel.” In each workshop, we were asked to list aspects of our identity that place us in a dominant group and then aspects that make us part of a subordinate group. We were then asked to reflect on one of our subordinate group memberships (e.g., for Jean, having been a first generation college student and for Sue, being a non-tenure-track faculty member), and to consider how this exercise helps us respond sensitively to members of other subordinate groups. We plan to do this exercise with our tutors next semester.

### *Universal Design and the Setting for Tutoring*

The remaining five principles apply not to tutor preparation and practice, the subject of our discussion so far, but rather to writing center spaces, resources, and services. Still, we found the insights reached through applying these principles



directly relevant. The changes they suggest for the scene of our tutoring will necessarily influence what happens in sessions themselves, creating the physical framework for implementing a Universal Design approach to dealing with the differences tutors and tutees bring to sessions.

**Equitable use:** *Instruction is designed to be useful to and accessible by people with diverse abilities. Provide the same means of use for all students; identical whenever possible, equivalent when not.* Most writing centers strive to make their services accessible to all students. Some of the growth in online writing centers reflects an attempt to reach students who can't easily get to a campus center. Even campuses without official online writing centers, such as our own, are usually quite willing to have tutors e-mail or instant message with a student who has difficulty accessing the center. Also, as mentioned above, our Center has access to adaptive technology to allow for "equivalent" instruction when identical instruction isn't possible. But we realized that we don't always communicate this message to our tutors, faculty, or student writers. If students don't know about the possibility of having an online session, they may not think to ask for one. If tutors aren't knowledgeable about *Kurzweil 3000*, they won't consider suggesting it to students--not only students who have reading difficulties but also students who have an auditory rather than visual learning style, or students who find that they benefit greatly from hearing another voice reading their writing aloud. So while we may have "the same means of use" available, we need to publicize them.

**Perceptible information:** *Instruction is designed so that necessary information is communicated effectively to the student, regardless of ambient conditions or the student's sensory abilities.* Because tutees are working in the presence of a tutor, a computer, and many other resources related to writing, many possible formats for communicating information exist in any tutoring session. However, our tutor-created notebooks on writing in the disciplines, our textbooks and handbooks, and many of our handouts are available only in hard copy. We realized some students might benefit from having materials in another format such as Braille or available on-line so that they can listen to them through adaptive technology or enlarge the print, but to utilize these options students need to be informed of them. Now, on all of our tutoring tables we have the following sign: "If you would benefit from having any of our materials in a different format, please let the tutor know."

**Low physical effort:** *Instruction is designed to minimize non-essential physical effort in order to allow maximum attention to learning.* As do most centers, we allow students to work in hard copy or on a computer, and we encourage tutors to scribe or type for students when this seems helpful and appropriate. However, as with the previ-

ously discussed principles in this section, if these services aren't advertised as available to all, students may not know to ask and/or may hesitate to ask for what seems a "special service."

**Size and space for approach and use:** *Instruction is designed with consideration for appropriate size and space for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of a student's body size, posture, mobility, and communication needs.* We do have adequate space, appropriate lighting, and a variety of seating arrangements to accommodate differences in physical and cultural needs. However, decisions about the lay-out of our furniture and resources weren't always made with accessibility in mind. For example, a tutor pointed out that some of our handouts were placed in hanging files that a tutor or tutee in a wheelchair cannot reach. And at one of our locations, the forms and notebook/textbook resources were on a bookshelf behind the tutoring table, again inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair. We found that when we rearranged our furniture and resources with accessibility fully in mind, the space was more visually appealing and more comfortable for all.

**Instructional climate:** *Instruction is designed to be welcoming and inclusive. High expectations are espoused for all students.* Like most writing centers, we strive to create a welcoming, inclusive, and encouraging environment. But we could do more to signal students that diversity is welcomed at the Writing Center. For example, the artwork on our walls reflects what was available. In one of our locations we happen to have a hanging rug from Guatemala and a poster of ideographic and pictographic symbols from Ghana. But in our second location tutees stare at a floral print and at our Center's certificate from the College Reading and Learning Association. Similarly, we considered multiculturalism in choosing photos for our website and brochure, and we include a statement about diversity in our tutor recruitment materials: "The Writing Center values and advocates for diversity in its student services and recruitment practices." Yet we do not include the statement on our flyers or bookmarks, the publicity intended for students.

## *Conclusion*

Applying the nine principles of Universal Design for Instruction to the UVM Writing Center helped us identify improvements we can make to a variety of aspects of our Center, including our physical space and layout, available resources, signage, publicity materials, tutoring pedagogy, and tutor preparation. These changes, designed to enable our Center and sessions to naturally accommodate a wide range of tutors and writers without having to separate out any individuals or groups as "different," will help create a climate that is more welcoming and acces-

sible to all and will help create a structure that ensures all students are treated equally and are offered equal (or equivalent) services. As the advocates of Universal Design suggest, these changes benefit not just students with disabilities but all students.

In their chapter "Changing the Role of Schools" in *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, Kalantzis and Cope assert that of the four archetypical forms of modern education—exclusion, assimilation, multiculturalism, and pluralism—"equity cannot be achieved in any but the pluralist alternative." Pluralism, they explain,

involves a subtle but profound shift from a more superficial multiculturalism. Pluralism means that the mainstream—be that the culture of the dominant groups or institutional structures such as education—is itself transformed. Instead of representing a single cultural destination, a monolithic cultural position, it is a site of openness, negotiation, experimentation, and the interrelation of alternative frameworks and mindsets. (124)

Many writing center scholars have called for this pluralistic approach to diversity, arguing that writing centers, often located on the fringes of the power structure, can lead the resistance to an assimilationist approach and can model how diverse views and practices can help change our institutions for the better (Bawarshi and Pelkowski; Barron and Grimm; Cooper; Grimm). By embracing Universal Design, which originated in the disability community, we allow ourselves to be changed by our interactions with that community and thus model a pluralistic approach. At the same time, we acquire a new avenue for rethinking and redesigning our writing centers so that they become places where considerations of identity are woven into the fabric of every session, places open to being changed by their constant and varied encounters with diversity, places that are not only examples of but also agents for instituting a pluralistic approach to education.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The tutors and students quoted in this article have all given permission for us to use their work. Their names have been changed except when we cite a conference presentation or give credit for a Universal Design strategy.

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