

CHAPTER 11.

VOICE, SILENCE, AND
INVOCATION: THE PERILOUS
AND PLAYFUL POSSIBILITIES
OF NEGOTIATING IDENTITY
IN WRITING CENTERS

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Every day in writing centers, consultants and writers negotiate, voice, silence, and invoke complex systems of identity. Consultants and writers come out, pass, or seek alternative options as they navigate rhetorical situations of context, text, and audience. As a doctoral candidate and writing center consultant of intersecting and often invisible identities—I am a gay man of mixed Cherokee and Euroamerican descent—I must often consider if, when, how, and why to come out about my identities in some way during a consultation. I regularly encounter writers who also are navigating such situations. We are all passing, in differing extents, identities, and levels of risk. We try to pass as fascinated in every writing consultation, administrative meeting, and classroom, to promote community. We try to pass as more-heterosexual or more-White in certain spaces, to remain safe. We try to pass as a peer in our writing center consultation, a friend to our colleague, an authority in a publication. Identity is nuanced and generates different experiences, but we all navigate disclosure across various, changing rhetorical contexts.

In this chapter, I discuss the disclosure of identities in writing centers from a social systems theory standpoint; here, writers, consultants, and writing centers act not in isolation but in systems where, as Werner Schirmer and Dimitris Michailakis (2019) stated, “Systems are complex entities that consist of a number of elements and their relations” (p. 2). Discussions of disclosure and concealment often focus on the individual as the active agent, where one must simply choose to come out, and is always free to do so. Or, the community is the active agent, where one is forced into concealment or disclosure according to the pressures and expectations of their social/cultural milieu. Social systems theory helps researchers move away from, and queer, this more binary approach. Because social systems

theory centers on understanding systems and contexts, we gain knowledge of a phenomenon like disclosure in writing centers through knowing the systems in which it exists and functions, and we also gain awareness of writing center work as a rhizome in dialogue with writing program administration work.

Social systems theory recognizes what Hans Van Ewijk (2018) termed the “complexity” of communication and social reality. Writers come into our centers with networks of histories, present concerns, and futures voiced and unvoiced just in relation to the writing project at hand, as well as further networks as relevant to them as writers, students, scholars, and community members. Through social systems theory, consultants and writing center professionals recognize the numerous social systems and networks each individual must constantly navigate, including the subsystems of the different communities present in the writing center for each writer on each visit. We recognize that these systems are always more multifaceted and multivalent than we can ever fully know. As writing center administrators and consultants approaching this work through social systems theory, even though we necessarily focus our attention onto the writing project and the writer’s discrete goals for this work at hand, we seek to recognize and honor the knowable and unknowable complexities of the writer’s full person.

Thus, social systems theory is relational and holistic work, as scholars including Stephan Fuchs (2001) and Haim Shaked and Chen Schechter (2016) wrote, a stance echoed by Schirmer and Michailakis’ description of this theoretical approach and practice as “creative, autonomous, and empathic thinking” (2019, p. 5), characteristics also quite applicable to the daily tasks of many writing center administrators and consultants. Approaching disclosure through social systems theory enables us to honor this complexity, even as we seek to understand and support these writers’ processes. In the following pages, I will discuss current conversations on navigating identity in writing centers, offer lived scenarios and reflections on coming out and remaining silent for consultants and for writers, introduce the alternative concept of invocation, and extend scholarship on social systems theory and queer theory to offer targeted and tangible takeaways for writing center administrators and for consultants to use in training and tutoring sessions. It is also my hope rhetoric and composition program administrators will read this chapter with an openness for how they might apply my analyses and recommendations to their programs.

NAVIGATING IDENTITY IN THE WRITING CENTER

As a collaborative, conversation-based space within academia, writing centers provide opportunities and challenges for navigating identity in consultations for consultants and writers. Writing centers are themselves often marginalized in

the larger academic community. As Eric C. Camarillo wrote in this collection, “The writing center isn’t just a border. It is itself bordered.” Similar to other spaces discussed in third-space research, writing centers offer a space not-classroom but not-unacademic, where writers work alongside consultants who are not-professors but also not-classmates. Writers discuss their writing in a space that is outside of grades while still rigorous; and administrators, Harry Denny (2010b) stated, “must engage in a sort of perpetual disclosure” to the larger university (p. 119). In this empathic, intellectual space between academia and community, writers and consultants construct and position texts. These texts include the identities of the consultant and the writer. How do we generate our identities, and writers’ identities, in sessions? Who are we, as consultants? Who do we imagine each writer to be? How do we, as Andrea Lunsford (1991) wrote, mediate and construct knowledge and identity via collaborative dialogue in a tutoring session? How are these issues complicated by the invisible identities held by consultants and writers?

Most identities exist along a multidimensional spectrum of visibility. While some identity categories tend to be more visible than others (race and sex, according to Denny), in our increasingly intersectional world, these categories—alongside gender, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and many other categories—can be strikingly invisible. For several years, I worked in a space where the (White) members of senior leadership would frequently comment, when issues of diversity were brought forward, “We’re all White people here,” or some variation thereof, despite over 25% of total staff openly identifying as Black peoples, Indigenous peoples, or other peoples of color (BIPOC). Such comments would also be made even in smaller groups, where openly BIPOC individuals comprised 50%—or more—of staff “here” in the room. What are the identities we think we see, and what are the identities we misinterpret or occlude?

More students, staff, and faculty on college campuses nationwide hold diverse identities, according to organizations including the Modern Language Association and the Human Rights Campaign. Writing centers, also, witness this increasing diversity. Thus, the disclosure and negotiation of identity is relevant regardless of whether a particular consultant or writer holds a marginalized and/or invisible identity. Discussions of identity, as Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace (2009) argued, “are critical because they provide opportunities for all students to deconstruct one important aspect of our collective narration of culture” (p. 305). Who we are and who we imagine ourselves to be, who our peers and colleagues and writers are and are imagined, and who our texts’ audiences are and are imagined generates particular ways of seeing and being in the world. These aspects connect to often-hegemonic systems of sociocultural and political narratives, and it is possible, Camarillo asserted in this collection, “writing

centers . . . are always working from places of hegemony, their implicit practices serving to reinforce traditional power structures.” If we, as writing center administrators and consultants, remain unaware of these connections, we may reproduce hegemonic systems for ourselves and the writers we serve, as Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski (1999) cautioned. And what would it mean to reinforce a hegemonic system on writers or on ourselves, especially during more vulnerable discussions of coming out, passing, and issues of identity?

Despite increasing awareness of and need for increased scholarship on marginalized identities in writing centers, the current state of the scholarly conversation remains sparse. In 2013, Andrew Rihn and Jay Sloan reviewed over 30 years of writing center scholarship and found only 14 articles with substantive analysis of queer topics. On my university’s databases, my September 2022 search for peer-reviewed articles with “writing center” as the key subject yielded thousands of results. A similar search for “writing center” and “queer”—or terms for specific queer identities, as well as “LGBT” and acronym variations thereof—yielded fewer than 100 total unique results. Further, searching for “writing center” and “Native American”—or specific names of Indigenous Nations, Tribes, and communities, as well as “Indigenous,” “First Nations,” and “Métis”—yielded fewer than 50 unique results. In both cases, few results held extended discussion of these key terms in relation. Also, few results engaged social systems theory, despite how this approach engages systems of being, identity, communication, and meaning-making—elements seen in writing centers daily—in new and consequential ways.

Meanwhile, certain cornerstone texts of writing center scholarship, like Stephen North’s 1984 article “The Idea of a Writing Center,” remain, according to Elizabeth Boquet and Neal Lerner (2008), extreme singular influences that dominate the conversation and limit space for others to join. When we privilege certain systems of communication and identity, we exclude other systems. Exclusion always exists; most individuals are excluded from most systems and organizations due to formal requirements (e.g., age or health) or ascriptive requirements (e.g., interest level). Still, individuals and communities also find meaningful inclusion through what Niklas Luhmann (2005) termed “function systems” (p. 226). Here, we relate to each other through shared functions, such as “consultant” or “writer” in a writing center, or as “scholars” in academic discourse. We need diversified citations that bring more voices into our community. We need our scholarship to better represent the diversifying function system of our field.

Despite challenges in meaningful and substantive engagement of diverse topics and voices in scholarship, writing centers remain pivotal sites for authenticity and empowerment. Marilyn Cooper (1994) believed “the goal of empowering students can best be achieved in a writing center” (p. 103), even as Kathryn Valentine and Mónica Torres (2011) admitted “identity confounds any

easy assumption of equity and equality in the tutoring session” (p. 195). What happens when identities are confounded by the decision of the consultant or the writer to come out about their marginalized and potentially invisible identity? What about when the consultant or the writer chooses to remain silent, particularly when we recognize and witness this silence?

WHEN THE CONSULTANT SPEAKS

Human communication is a fraught system and process of interpretation dependent on mutuality and openness. What we say (and, further, what we think we say or what we mean to say) is generally never unequivocal, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) described. As consultants, by deciding whether to come out or to pass in a session, and by reflecting on choices made and their effects, we learn alongside Rihn and Sloan (2013) how “the writing center can become a key site for investigating what it means to negotiate identity on the fly, in unpremeditated moments of intimacy” (p. 9). So, what happens when we—the consultant—come out in a session?

I'm meeting with a transfer undergraduate writer about her critical essay, where she is asked to take a controversial word, describe controversies surrounding this word, and generate a solution through research and reflection. This writer chose “pioneer.” She mentions, “Native American readers might not like my views. I planned on asking my consultant if they were a Native American, but then I saw I was working with you, so I didn't.” I look surprised, then say, “Funny you should say that! I'm of Native and Euroamerican descent.” Now she looks surprised, and says, “Is that right? I never would have guessed! You don't look Native American. I'm fascinated by Native Americans. I love their culture. I love their skin and how they look.” The writer repeatedly expresses her surprise and fascination that I am Native and her fascination with “their culture,” before sharing her experiences as a Caribbean immigrant and first-generation United States citizen, through which we return to her essay.

In this scenario, I disclosed my Native identity to this writer as a response to her concern about her essay's impact on Native audiences, and to disrupt and question her assumptions of visible and invisible markers of Native identity. Yet, Denny (2010b) explained, consultants' disclosures of invisible identities are “precarious,” because doing so makes consultants subject to rejection (p. 119), as well as, like Alexander and Wallace (2009) noted, fetishizing and tokenizing. Within the hegemonic systems of academia, present even in writing centers, questions of agency are complicated for consultants and writers alike. Yet, as Elise Dixon (2017) explained, “opening up spaces of discomfort is a key part of the meaning-making process” (para. 4). Empowering growth often occurs when one, perhaps due to discomfort, pushes beyond unquestioned beliefs into

a space for more authentic dialogue, allowing writers to synthesize new perspectives and a diverse range of texts. It is not the responsibility of the consultant to come out in a session, and this chapter will consider, later, how alternatives to direct disclosure might be more impactful and useful for administrators and consultants. However, by coming out and serving as a teacher-learner in the alongside space with the writer in this way, the consultant occupies a contingent space where their identity might be engaged and where their identity might become the text of a lesson, even if the consultant does not wish to be a lesson or text. As a result, the writer and consultant can then begin to navigate the resulting communication system.

Communication becomes complicated when disclosing—or discussing—identity, as such conversations usually focus more on feelings and experiences rather than on observable data. “When we think about how we communicate feelings and experiences,” Schirmer and Michailakis asserted, “the latter cannot be transmitted, and in contrast to knowledge and news, they cannot even be sent or received” (2019, p. 12). Because of these gaps, communication, especially in subjective or internal matters like identity disclosure, exists not as a pure transmission of knowledge between individuals within a system, but as the systemic concept of “an emergent reality” in itself (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2019, p. 15). As scholars of writing centers and programs, we recognize that we never fully know what a writer means or intends to say. Still, we can study systems of communication, analyzing their patterns of expectations, normative behaviors, and sanctions. Similar to the “social facts” named by sociologist Émile Durkheim (1895), these systems of communication manifest in writing centers. Through this systematic study, we move from this gap of knowledge toward emergent understanding, standing with writers as their consultants.

For example, in Canada in 2002, professor Tracey Swan found students in her social work course reacted positively to her disclosure of her lesbian identity. Such professor (or consultant) disclosure—“using one’s life as a text,” she wrote (2002, p. 7)—augmented students’ navigation of heterosexism, homophobia, and client diversity in their professional and personal development. Her decision to come out made oppression tangible and generated room to question discrimination and stereotypes, enhance critical awareness of how language intersects with oppression across contexts, and generate authentic dialogue. At the same time, though, Swan found such disclosure to blur personal/professional boundaries in inappropriate ways, demand “a reciprocal gesture that the student might not be ready to offer” (2002, p. 9), and silence students if they then worry about offending the discloser. However, the impact of disclosure may depend as much on *who* discloses and *how* they disclose than on *what* is disclosed, making the timing of disclosure a key consideration—especially in a writing center, where

we often have only a single session with a given writer. Further, Swan, as a professor, occupies a different situation than that of a peer consultant, who often holds no grade-based power, meets with writers for only one session, serves only one writer at a time, and works in a shared professional space. The writing center is a much more contingent space than a term-long class. Consultants must draw upon their multiple identities in this emergent space within a single session and without professorial authority, raising the stakes of this system.

How does a consultant navigate the spaces between coming out, subsequent discussions, and the return to the writer's text and goals for that session? How can a consultant come out in a way that honors, as Denny (2010a) encouraged, their own "obligation to complicate and make possible a whole range of understanding" (p. 106)? And how does our coming out to the writer complicate the rhetorical orientation of the writer's text? If a text is problematic, for example, in presenting all Native American peoples as inhabiting one culture or mindset, what happens when the writer learns this text is being read by a Native person who might not fit into the writer's notions of what Native identity looks like and means? At the same time, how can a consultant's coming out open a mutual consideration of what Joe Salvatore and Judith McVarish (2014) called "risk-taking, questioning, critical thinking, and most importantly, self-reflection," without taking the focus of the session away from the writer and their goals (p. 49)?

WHEN THE CONSULTANT IS SILENT

But what about when we, as consultants, choose not to come out in a session, even when faced with questionable interpretations of our own identities in a writer's text?

I'm meeting with a first-year undergraduate writer about her editorial, where she is responding to the destruction of a park to build a commercial development. I ask, "Why should this park be preserved?" She says, "It's historically significant." I encourage her by asking, "How so?" She responds, "The Native Americans used to use it. It was important to them and Native American culture. I know that's all in the past now, but it's still relevant." When we look at her essay, I observe aloud that the paragraph on the Native influence is uniquely in past tense, and the language moves between discussing one tribe and broad cultures without distinction. She confirms her past tense as intentional, as "they don't live there anymore," and the conflation as also intentional, because "tribes saw the natural world in similar ways." We move on, returning here only when relevant to larger themes (e.g., making a thesis map).

I wondered, throughout this consulting session and in the weeks and months to come, whether I made the "right" choice in remaining silent about my Native identity with this writer. What would have happened if the writer learned that

her text, which presented Native peoples as extinct, was being read by a Native person? How would that complicate the text's obligation to its perceived readership, its potential readership, and to our larger world? But also, what did it mean for me—or for any consultant of a marginalized identity being invoked in a potentially problematic way by a text—to remain silent about and during this invocation?

In this session, while my agency as a consultant—as a reader, mentor, and guide for this writer's navigation of her professor's prompt—is retained, my agency as an individual—and as a collaborative partner in meaning-making—is diminished. Accordingly, Alexander and Wallace (2009) argued, "When we cannot speak our truths, our sense of agency is restricted" (p. 304). How is not speaking a kind of speaking? Refraining from explicit questioning of material can be implicit endorsement of such material. By letting "dominant assumptions," as Richard Miller (1994) wrote, "pass through the classroom unread and unaffected" (p. 391). I would add, unchallenged, we replicate and condone hegemonic, colonialist attitudes and structures.

Across writing centers and writing programs, we help writers build transferable skills in rhetoric, voice, and agency that transcend academic boundaries. I wonder how a consultant's coming out can open routes to building these skills. I wonder how silence and passing can close such routes, or whether silence and passing can ever open such routes. In an interview with Travis Webster (2021), the writing center director "Cara," a self-described "feminist queer woman," shared, "I am advocating for speaking up. It's not about, 'Well did you say, have you considered all of your audiences,' no, saying, 'This is offensive' and 'This is wrong' and just really speaking up and being an ally" (p. 63). Must one always speak up in some way, whether through coming out or through other questioning, to be an ally? I continue to feel conflicted about how I handled this situation with this editorial writer.

Yet, entertaining the binary notion of full silence or full passing, especially for identities that impact our verbal, interpersonal, and physical ways of being in the world, feels disingenuous and unlikely. In this scenario, due to my physical appearance, the writer (to my knowledge) did not suspect that her text was being read and discussed by a Native person. In other scenarios, however, if our identities are apparent or partially intuited by writers, what does it mean for them to know we are choosing to pass instead of coming out?

WHEN THE WRITER SPEAKS

Because communication is an emergent social system, every dialogue between writer and consultant is a network of utterances, such as verbal and nonverbal

communicative acts, generated via what Schirmer and Michailakis (2019) called “selections”—that is, conscious and unconscious choices between communicative possibilities. Sometimes, consultants select verbal silence, as I did in the scenario above. Sometimes, consultants select verbal and/or nonverbal voice, as in the first scenario. Throughout our consultations, we can ask: what is said? How is it said? What nonverbal acts accompany this saying? These questions help reveal the selections behind every utterance and show that every utterance, even every moment of every dialogue, is contingent. What is said—here? What is said—to whom? What is said—in this moment? But the consultant is only one actor in this network of utterances. What about when we consider the complexity of coming out or remaining silent for the other person at the table, the other half of this consulting relationship: the writer?

I'm meeting through an online video-and-text session with a first-year graduate writer about his summer internship application, where he is asked to discuss his personal, academic, and professional reasons for applying. He is in the brainstorming stage, so we dialogue, using the platform's synchronous text-based messaging system about what brought him to his field and this internship. After I ask, "Tell me about what you enjoy researching in your program?" he is silent for over two minutes, thoughtful, reflective. In the small video picture of the writer in one corner of the platform's screen, I can see his brow furrowing as he works to formulate his response. Watching the messaging system, I see him start several sentences—"Because," "I," "There is," and "I am"—before backspacing. Then, he types in one continuous span, "I am a Yemeni Muslim. My faith and my family are very important to me, and I've seen many challenges. I want to help those who don't have voice because I know what that feels like." I thank him for sharing his story and affirm the importance of who we are to how we shape our lives, before we return to discussing his knowledges, skills, and career paths—as influenced by his identity—and how they connect to this internship. His responses come quickly for the remainder of the session, and he generates a full essay outline.

Regardless of a writer's explicit or implicit coming out or passing, there is so much coming out on the part of a writer in any session. Writers must admit they feel their writing needs another set of eyes, must admit the elements of their writing that concern them, and must admit their writing voice and style to consultant-writers with the text under discussion. Also, as part of rapport-building initial conversation, they must admit background information about themselves (e.g., their major and some feelings about themselves, their college trajectory, and their writing), often all before the first five minutes of a session have passed. Harriet Malinowitz (1995) described how queer students, “dealing in myriad situations with issues of secrecy, concealment, and disclosure” in most departments across campus, must generate and sustain a “rhetorical self-consciousness”

to navigate their daily lives (p. 254). While she wrote about queer students, such rhetorical complexities occur daily in many students' lives, to varying degrees, and particularly in the lives of students with marginalized or invisible identities.

One could say it this way, or one could not; one could opt to disclose their identity in one moment, or not. Differences abound when thinking of how, in representing dialogue, whether through face-to-face verbal encounters or through text-based platforms, we also represent the social system of communication with the inclusion or exclusion of the psychological systems of thought, feeling, and experience. How might this scenario have moved differently if we were face-to-face, or if we were online without video? Communication is contingent, unpredictable, and always shaded in multivalence and situational particularities.

With this in mind, I wonder about the consultant's responsibility when a writer comes out in the consulting session. Writing center administrators and consultants often describe their work as somewhere along the spectrum of teacher and counselor, facilitator and mentor, voice and sounding board. Opting to disclose, or not, can be a useful move for consultants to help writers gain insight and broaden metacognition. In situations when the writer discloses, as in this scenario, consultants become teacher, counselor, and learner all at once within a system of multidimensional possibility, as consultant and writer teach each other about each other in the work of developing rhetorical awareness and incorporating multiple perspectives into our claims and ways of operating within academia.

A writer's coming out might not be a shift away from the text at hand but the addition of another valuable text. If so, consultants can foster an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and valuing by avoiding assumptions about what meanings a writer's identity may hold, and instead, as Valentine and Torres urged, work toward "the more complicated stories of racial and ethnic identities merging in our institutions" (2011, p. 206). But what would it mean to complicate a moment of disclosure with invocation of rhetoric, text, audience? In this intricate interpretive system of selections and utterances, the spectrum of visibility and invisibility in identity must complicate our notions of what coming out might look like.

WHEN THE WRITER IS (VISIBLY) SILENT

Some writers choose to come out in the consultation. Some writers remain silent, and as consultants and administrators, we might never know—nor need to know—what silences may be in play. But sometimes, due to a not-quite-invisible identity, we notice this silence.

I'm meeting with a senior undergraduate writer about her business proposal, where she outlines her team's research and development plan for an eco-friendly beauty product. This writer presents as a woman in clothing, hair, makeup, and name on her appointment; yet, her deep voice and name on her student email presents masculine characteristics. When asked to read her essay aloud, she looks startled and nervous. I discuss why we read aloud and share that it is also perfectly fine to have the writer and consultant take turns reading, or to have the consultant read, but that we love to hear the work in the writer's voice, when possible, if they are comfortable. She agrees to read and begins very quietly, reaching a volume more like our initial conversation level by the end. Though she fidgets and avoids eye contact when our discussion approaches passages describing her "woman-owned company" and a company "made for women, by women," she returns to her calm, engaged demeanor when we discuss these passages in the same non-judgmental tone as all others—focusing on her intended audience of executives, and honoring her authority as the scholar and business owner.

Sometimes, writers of visible and/or invisible identities will come out directly in a consulting session, explicitly making space to bring meaning and voice into the conversation. Other times, consultants may be aware the writer likely holds a marginalized identity but is choosing not to come out, as in the scenario above. Speech and silence, action and inaction, and all choices are communicative behavior. So, as theorists Paul Watzlawick et al. (2011) described, one cannot *not* communicate in the presence of another person. For this writer, answering my invitation for her to read her work aloud by breaking eye contact and shifting in her seat is an act of communication. And while I am aware of this writer's initial reluctance to read aloud, and I could imagine a possible identity-based reason for this hesitance, I feel it would be harmful to voice my thoughts on these concerns or to treat her any differently than any other writer. My own silence on her silence is also an act of communication, just as much as my discussion of alternatives to the writing center's reading-aloud policy.

By treating this writer just as I would any other writer, I tried to avoid what Alexander and Wallace (2009) called "forms of othering that are often used to acknowledge the existence of the marginalized while keeping them in the margins" (p. 303). This writer's anxiety may have been related to a fear of outing or of her gender identity becoming an additional party in this conversation she wished to keep focused on her writing. Or not. Regardless, equitable and consistent practices across consultations are useful, even if such practices themselves require constant flexibility to move, realize, and grow to meet each writer's individual needs—to "*listen more*," as Anne DiPardo (1992) recommended for a Black consultant with a Native writer—especially in the vulnerable topic of identity (p. 140). In this session, I realized a potential complication to writing

centers' policies of having work read aloud, often by the writer. Even alongside its goals of helping writers gain empowerment, voice, and authority, this standard procedure of reading aloud could out a writer against their will to their consultant or others in the room.

To verbally disclose identity is an act of communication, arguably just as much as to choose to not verbally disclose (and/or to non-verbally disclose) is an act of communication. With Watzlawick et al.'s (2011) theory of the omnipresence of communication in mind, I wonder how consultants can avoid assumptions that coming out (visibly, audibly) is preferable to passing, or that passing is preferable to coming out. Though consultations can occur without need for personal pronouns, should consultants always share their pronouns and ask writers for their own? With many professional introductions expanding beyond offering name and role (or major) to offering name, role, and pronouns, the absence of pronoun inclusion is a communicative act, and this act may be noticed and felt by our colleagues and those we serve. How, then, can we hold spaces of both voice and silence as emergent systems of communicative acts? Is it ever useful or acceptable to invoke a perceived non-disclosed identity, as one housed in the writer or consultant, or as one housed in potential readers?

WHEN WE TALK AROUND AND THROUGH, WITHOUT EXPLICIT DISCLOSURE

I wonder about these situations—the consultant coming out, the consultant remaining silent, the writer coming out, the writer remaining silent. I wonder if these scenarios generate a binary, where our options are either full disclosure (by consultant or writer) or full silence. I want us to queer this binary to imagine other possibilities. Queer theory enables us, as Jan Cooper (2004) wrote, to “attend to the complex experiences of individuals interacting with each other within and across cultures” (p. 36), where binaries and static positions are just one way of being in the world. Other ways of being—many other ways of being—involve triangulations, septangulations, and fluid positions in systems and sequences that we all, in some way, inhabit.

I'm meeting with a junior undergraduate writer on her prospectus, where she proposes traveling to major United States military archives to research silences of queer veterans. After she reads the abstract, we dialogue. I say, "This sounds like new research." She responds, "Yes—and important to do for folks both in and outside the queer community." I mention, "I attended a conference featuring a keynote by Matthew Shepard's father. So powerful. These stories inspire empathy and voice." The writer agrees. Time is limited, so we skip some sections of her choice, including "Personal Relevance," which includes a sentence where she comes out as lesbian. But

she pauses in moving from the section before to the section after, and I cannot help but scan the page and see her sentence. When we move on, there is a different feel to the session—she is more relaxed, more direct in discussing her work.

Beyond the two binary options of coming out or remaining silent, we have options for self-conscious, critical existence and use of multiple discourses—of passing, of coming out; of acculturation, of subversion; and more. Communication systems are emergent systems, and they are, Schirmer and Michailakis (2019) described, changeable, unpredictable, and difficult to plan. Most writing center administrators and consultants would agree that the writing center echoes this dynamic space. Each consultation brings new challenges, questions, and rewards one may never have been able to predict. Accordingly, Boquet (2002) wrote, “To function as an apparatus of educational transformation” as writing centers and consultants, “we must imagine a liminal zone where chaos and order coexist” (p. 84). As in the last scenario, disclosure and silence are both communicative acts. We can further multiply communicative possibilities by acknowledging, like Watzlawick et al. (2011), that every communicative behavior has a content aspect (i.e., what is communicated) and a relational aspect (i.e., how it is communicated). It is an act of communication that this writer chooses not to read her “Personal Relevance” section aloud, another act that she pauses in silence as our eyes move over this section, another act that she glances at me and sees my reading during her brief pause, and another act that her demeanor changes after this shared, and charged, silence.

Honoring and invoking this metacommunicative relational aspect, we work toward invoking Gloria Anzaldúa’s work of the “border residency/consciousness” (1987, p. 79). In this border space, we negotiate these emergent communicative systems as multiple contradictory contexts, identities, audiences, and rhetorical strategies, even while we continue to exist in the dominant discourses. In border residency/consciousness, we exist not as fixed points or static identities but as strategic and contextualized systems of potentiality. Jicarilla Apache scholar Loyola K. Bird concurs, stating consultants should prioritize discussions of context, situation-dependent linguistics, student needs, and “what it means to move ‘between worlds’” (Gray-Rosendale et al., 2003, p. 88). There is much to be gained when existing not as either-or, but as in-between.

One productive possibility of border consciousness is how it lets us see consultations as what Nancy Welch (1999) called “potential spaces” (p. 54). These potential spaces, Welch argued, do not necessarily arise out of full-adherence-to or full-resistance-to academic expectations and conventions, but, rather, out of queering hegemonic systems of space to find liminal borderland—room to create, experiment, and play. This space energizes writers and consultants to decide when and how they, Denny wrote, “choose to resist or further challenge and

question” (2010a, p. 110). Such rhetorical decisions generate transferable skills beyond the consultation and across academia, professional trajectories, and community engagements. By opening potential spaces, we re-envision with Welch how “an estranging gap becomes now a space of potential and play” (1999, p. 57). This potential and play generated “both a view of and a space apart from the surrounding world” (Welch, 1999, p. 59), and new possibilities for negotiating passing and coming out and liminal/border consciousness emerge. We recognize the writer’s text as another audience, another system of being, and another being at the table—a being with communicative needs with whom the writer and consultant, in this potential space, can consider and engage.

WHEN WE “COME OUT” TO—AND WITH—AND FOR—THE TEXT

In social systems theory, psychological and social systems of communication are often defined as “closed” systems in that they cannot exceed their predefined boundaries. It is impossible for one individual to read another’s mind or feel their emotions or sense their pain as their own. One’s thoughts, perceptions, and sensations cannot be downloaded to another. They must be shaped through shared social systems of communication to relay our individual psychological systems. According to Luhmann (1992), because communication can only express these social utterances, one could say that communication cannot think or feel, and psychological systems cannot communicate. What is one to do? We can turn to play, potentiality, and emergence.

When “the tutorial [consultation] becomes a potential space,” as Welch wrote, the consultant and writer come together to consider the needs of a third party: the writer’s text (1999, p. 60). Writer and consultant consider the text, its contexts, and importantly, its audiences. And by considering these potential audiences, sessions become emergent spaces where writers and consultants work together in “trying out, not closing out, different constructions of reality” (Welch, 1999, p. 64). Attention to the playful, transformative possibilities of considering these social systems of text and audience as other communicative parties at the table help us consider and express the implications of coming out to, with, and for the text and its audiences.

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (1984) discussed two rhetorical positions on negotiating audience: the “Audience Addressed,” or concrete, living individuals who will read a particular text; and the “Audience Invoked,” or constructed, imagined individuals who will likely never hold the text in question but are still present in its consideration (p. 156). Both audiences, Audience Addressed and Audience Invoked, fit into the potential categories of self, friend, colleague,

critic, mass audience, and future audience. Audience Invoked, though, also exists as past audience, such as a historical figure, and as anomalous audience, such as a fictional figure. When writing consultations become potential spaces of play that question and refigure communicative systems, writers and consultants can consider potential audiences and the psychological impact of the text on these audiences, whether they will literally be at the table at some point (Audience Addressed) or may never be, though they still exist however imaginatively in the same social system as the text (Audience Invoked).

Audience Invoked, then, becomes a way for consultants and writers to acknowledge diverse voices and perspectives and to consider the writer's text as it might impact the Invoked. If a text portrays Native American cultures as singular and extinct, as in the earlier scenario, one solution is for the consultant, if applicable, to share their Native identity to bring a new Audience Addressed to the table and enable the writer to consider the impact of their text on one example of such an audience. Another way, accessible to all consultants and another option for consultants who choose not to invoke their personal identity, would be to bring a new Audience Invoked to the table—an imagined Native American reader, presented as a unique psychological system and not as an abstract representation or generalization—to achieve the same results: helping the writer consider the impact of their text on a new audience.

Swan (2002) found her self-disclosure to her students as a lesbian person had effects including making tangible experiences of marginalization and oppression, encouraging growth away from unconscious assumptions, provoking critical awareness and consideration of diverse perspectives, and creating space of mutual trust and confidence in disclosure. However, all of these effects but the last can be achieved with the consultant's introduction of a relevant Audience Invoked. Perhaps the final effect can be achieved also, and more effectively.

Introducing a new reader through Audience Invoked sidesteps the consultant-writer power imbalance, giving both writer and consultant a third-person, less risky, and more accessible way to voice concerns and questions without the fear of offending someone physically at the table with them. Watzlawick et al. (2011) discuss how communicative relationships tend to exist as symmetric (i.e., based on equal power, such as learner-learner) or complementary (i.e., based on unequal power, such as manager-employee), and communicative systems tend to maintain the existing relationship, whether symmetric or complementary. If a consultant discloses their own marginalized identity to generate an Audience Addressed for a writer, the resulting communication, however productive, will tend to maintain the complementary communicative relationship of consultant-writer. However, if a consultant generates an Audience Invoked with a writer, the communication that results, particularly between writer and Audience

Invoked, will dwell in a symmetric communicative system more accessible and engaging for writer and text.

Thus, if disclosure for Swan means “using one’s life as a text” (2002, p. 7), it would work well to use the life of an Invoked one as a text, to place consultants and writers in a more mutual space of interpretation. This is not to encourage passing where coming out is desired and felt relevant. After all, the adage that personal stories are a highly effective way to touch hearts and change minds continues to be true. Voicing marginalized perspectives through Audience Invoked does provide another option for folks wishing not to come out, for whatever reason, and importantly offers all consultants, regardless of their identity categories, a means to work toward inclusion.

NEXT STEPS

We work in an emergent field, where communicative acts reverberate outward in ways we could never predict with each new consulting session and staff meeting. I seek to open the doors (and windows) into this discussion and invite dialogue. Ours is a collaborative field, where we generate knowledge “by negotiating collaboratively toward new paradigms of perception, thought, feeling, and expression” (Bruffee, 1984, p. 646). In writing centers, we inspire border consciousness and create potential spaces, according to Bawarshi and Pelkowski, through helping ourselves and our writers, “look prior to and outside of these discourses” (1999, p. 54). My chapter itself is a text and discourse, with room to grow, evolve, and expand through our collaboration, our questions and future research possibilities.

In 2008, Boquet and Lerner declared, “Writing center scholarship must manage, more often than it does now, ‘both-and’ rather than ‘either-or’” (p. 186). This statement remains true today, as writers and consultants nationwide are increasingly diverse, often in increasingly intersectional ways. Powerful work is being generated by diverse writing center scholars, often before they leave their graduate programs. For example, consider: Elizabeth Witherite’s thesis on writing center tutors’ perceptions of social justice issues (2014, Indiana University of Pennsylvania), Hillery Glasby’s dissertation on queer doing and being in the writing classroom (2016, Ohio University), Abbie Levesque’s thesis on queer writing and queer writing center practices (2017, Northeastern University), Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison’s dissertation on racism and antiracism from Black writing tutors at predominantly White institutions (2018, Purdue University), and Hillary Weiss’s dissertation on the complexities of coming out in community-based writing groups (2020, Wayne State University).

However, there are still many gaps and silences. What might a qualitative study reveal in surveying the effect on writers of consultant-disclosure in the

consulting session? What would we learn if we studied one identity category and its disclosures, silences, and invocations in writing center sessions? How has disclosure changed in and since 2020, with our widespread shift to online learning, heightened attention to systems of racial and cultural oppression, and changing relational expectations amid the COVID-19 pandemic and its various continuances? We have much room to expand this ongoing conversation.

At the same time, writing center administrators and consultants have access to tangible and scalable practices to promote identity-based invocation while remaining present and emergent in our positionality. For administrators, we can re-align our writing center's strategy, leadership, and hiring practices with campus-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and goals. We can leverage relationships with existing campus offices to support enhanced training for our staff and deepen existing work in our centers. We can partner with campus and community DEI offices, and/or national writing center organizations and resources, to pursue impactful hiring processes in materials (e.g., incorporating diversity statements), qualifications (e.g., evaluating what is truly required), and language (e.g., showing transparency in decision-making timelines, pay levels and benefits, and day-to-day duties). For consultants, we can support continued education in the campus or community through paid training time or schedule flexibility. We can support continued education in the writing center by implementing staff meetings or a space within existing meetings to discuss DEI books or films, dialogue about identity-based moments from tutoring sessions, role-play scenarios, and invite consultants to share relevant knowledges and experiences as holders of complex systems of identity.

Today, and at no cost, writing center administrators and consultants can work together to generate sentence frames for center-wide use in tutoring sessions when marginalized and/or silenced identities are invoked by the writer or their text, to help provide structure and build confidence in what can be a challenging and complicated topic. These sentence frames could include: "What audiences are we not thinking about here?" "What readers can you imagine feeling positive about this section/paragraph/sentence?" and "Who might feel not-so-positive here?" "What exceptions to this claim might a different reader ask?"—and starting each session's discussion of the text's rhetoric or audience with, "What audiences are at the table?"

Throughout these practices and across the writing center staff, we help each other by acknowledging our own individual sense of self, being, and boundaries. We are not alone in negotiating systems of identity within ourselves, among our centers, or with the students and texts we serve. The choice to come out, remain silent, or use Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked in a given session will not make—or break—the larger educational system. Rather than a burden, systems of

identity and possibilities for their navigation in a consultation are spaces of sacred play. The liminal space of the writing center within academia becomes a generative space of possibility for all of us to learn and play alongside writers and texts.

Writing centers and programs present a transformative environment in which to consider identity. How consultants, writers, and administrators navigate coming out, remaining silent, and alternative possibilities in regard to marginalized is a line of study with room for many voices to join. While every consultant, writer, and administrator might not navigate decisions of identity disclosure on a daily basis, we all live in an intersectional world and participate in complicated systems of communication. We—as makers and advocates of texts—have a responsibility to consider all the voices at the table, our Audiences Addressed, and all the voices who might not be present nor welcomed, our Audiences Invoked. Together, we can leverage communicative systems to move with writers toward consideration of how their texts, and even our consulting sessions, navigate, revel in, and honor these complexities.

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