Chapter 27. “Fucking Up” and Listening in the Writing Center

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Some years ago, I was part of a team of grad student tutors and administrators studying the literacy histories of tutors within our writing center. We interviewed research participants and met once a week to analyze data, talk about emergent themes and concepts, and discuss the research process. Even though this work was unpaid, as a research nerd and someone learning the qualitative research ropes, I was excited about this work and looked forward to our meetings. Plus, I loved working with this group of colleagues. They were bright, funny, and asked interesting questions about the data and one another.

But a problem emerged. During the upcoming spring term, our meeting time was in the middle of one of my regular shifts at the center–the same writing center directed by one of our research team members. From the director’s perspective, my problem was easily solved: rather than completely re-doing my schedule, I could use our existing shift-covering protocol to have a fellow tutor cover my shift during the meetings throughout the term. This is the same protocol I needed to use, for example, when I accepted a request to visit a class to talk about the writing center during my typical shifts.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, my director wanted me to get coverage for *both* these class visits *and* our research meetings. But I didn’t do that, in part because I didn’t know that was the expectation. I also didn’t seek coverage because of complicated feelings about getting coverage I couldn’t unpack at the time–about my role in the group and what my focus should be during my regularly scheduled tutoring shifts. So, I didn’t seek coverage. For weeks, I worked my normal shift in the center, popping into and out of the research meeting as needed to take a tutoring session. And when I was booked, I wouldn’t be in the meeting at all.

About halfway through that term, I had a meeting with my boss, the center director. Though cordial to start, she expressed some annoyance. Despite never being explicitly told before this moment that my performance wasn’t meeting expectations, despite never being explicitly told that I needed to get coverage to perform these other functions, and despite being praised by one of my experienced and respected colleagues as “one of the best tutors we have,” I was told that I was fucking up.

I expressed some regret, but at the time, I wasn’t sure I made a mistake. Not one big enough to warrant this reaction, anyway. Besides, surely my director could have told me all of this earlier when I had a chance to change course.

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The meeting must not have been going the way the director had hoped. At one point, she said, "Why won't you just say that you fucked up?" not exactly in exasperation–more a tone of surprise or confusion. We ALL fuck up, sometimes, of course. That was her point–that if I just say that I fucked up, that I acknowledge it, we can move on.

And I could see why the director thought so. I *should* have been more proactive about finding coverage and meeting those other important demands. Besides, maybe there were some things going on with my director that I didn't see and, because of my positionality as a white, straight, cis-man, can't understand. Maybe she felt the impact of gender–the fact that, in most of their relationships, even in positions of power, women in the US are expected to apologize, "make nice," and smooth over difficulty. Perhaps she was confused and hurt because I seemed defiant when really, I was clueless. I can empathize with her more now and feel bad for letting her down.

At the same time, I'm troubled by how my administrator didn't wonder what was going on with me and didn't seem to want to identify and solve the issue. I'm troubled, too, that I wasn't made aware of these problems before this extremely consequential meeting. I lost my full assistantship and was moved to half-time, a demotion that cost me tens of thousands of dollars in benefits and wages. And, as far as I know, nothing ever came of the project we were working on–the project that brought this tension to a head. I recognize now that earlier check-ins, warnings, or feedback may have been difficult for my boss to provide. She was busy and perhaps didn't want to create conflict. Yet, I realize that this lack of communication–followed by a conflict that was life-altering for me but perhaps not so much for her–had serious impacts that I feel to this day.

Looking back, I can explain myself and my actions a bit better. It's taken years of processing and some reading about how students like myself with working class backgrounds experience and respond to the norms in higher education to unpack what was going on. I write this to help explain what sometimes can't be connected in the moment: the murky soup of our past experiences, our miscommunications, and the mistakes that good, genuine, well-meaning people make. I believe my director was a genuine, well-meaning person, and I did my best to be a good-faith actor, too. But I was also never explicitly taught how to prioritize work duties for this center or for academic work more broadly, or how to seek guidance, useful feedback, and clarification from my boss. My class background and gender helped make me oblivious to these possibilities.

I write all of this to create space for grace and to offer a suggestion: maybe our judgments of employees and mentees–finding them either lacking or sufficient to the task–are raced, gendered, and classed. Maybe what we see when we judge our consultants, tutors, and colleagues is the extent to which they are privileged, particularly as that privilege relates to the norms, conventions, and power operant in academia. It's much easier to get along and get ahead when you arrive knowing, say, that constantly checking in with your bosses is expected and not "ass kissing"

as I thought it was. My cluelessness to these norms probably played a significant role in what happened.

I struggled in this situation, too, because of my incomplete understanding about the purpose of my work at the center and the work of the center itself. *I* thought that my main job was tutoring fellow students. It turned out that outreach and connection-making were highly prized in this center. Indeed, these kinds of outward-facing events and activities–where less-visible academic support services like writing tutoring take center stage for a few minutes in a few classes every semester–were politically important enough to be worth the resources and hassle. This was unimaginable to me then. And because no one bothered to explain the high relative value of these events, I dismissed them, believing that by tutoring students, I was doing the *real*, most important work of the center–an understanding I see now was woefully incomplete.

Compounding this cluelessness was a persistent case of imposter syndrome. Because my boss knew the meeting was held during my shift and didn't change my schedule, I presumed this was a message: I wasn't needed or wanted in this meeting. This wasn't true, but without an avenue to talk with my director and process these negative feelings, my harmful presumptions festered. Unbeknownst to her, other parts of my grad student life were also sending me the message that I didn't belong: maliciously competitive classmates, other recurring meetings scheduled (in my anxiety-wrought mind) deliberately when I couldn't attend. And my working-class background prepared me poorly to advocate for myself. It was going above my station to tell bosses–in this case, the faculty and staff leaders of a committee on which I was the student representative–to accommodate my needs.

I recognize now there was plenty I could have done to smooth this out for everyone. I could have worked on my anxiety and checked in with my director more frequently, even if I thought everything was fine. I could have asked more questions about my full-time-tutor role and made sure I prioritized job duties correctly. And, now, as a writing center director myself, I know I'll need to be curious–to ask questions of those not performing as I believe they should and provide support. But I also worry about how I will make my *own* tacit rules and expectations clear to my first-generation, BIPOC, working class, and/or international-origin tutors. The cluelessness I describe above is a relatively small tip of what might be a much larger iceberg for so many of our tutors. I wonder, given the challenges I faced, how I can explain all of these powerful but quietly operant assumptions to them, better preparing them for academia than I was.