

Chapter 35. What the COVID-19 Pandemic Taught Us About Writing Center Work: The Joys of a Tutor at the Laboratory of Academic Literacy (LLAC)

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Likened to a Yoruba proverb, “*Kari kapo ni nyeni*,” there is joy in a cooperative effort. In writing center work, tutors and tutees work collaboratively to improve tutees’ texts. However, there is little focus on the importance of focusing on tutors, who I will refer to as their “backbone.” This narrative uses my experience to highlight the joys experienced in writing center work. Tutors have individual needs and material realities, which, if recognized, can bring growth because writing centers cannot thrive without efficient tutors “*igi kan ko le da igbo se*” (a tree cannot make a forest).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed us to an unexpected reality of social distancing, contrary to human nature hardwired for connections that bring about a feeling of belonging. We relied on online platforms such as Skype, Google Meet, and Zoom for meetings, interactions, and communication to protect ourselves from the ravaging coronavirus’s effect.

This new reality highlighted the importance of belonging to support groups where we share a sense of connectedness. Born into the Yoruba cultural tribe of southwestern Nigeria, I recognized the importance of belonging to communities early in life. The Yoruba people believe that as human beings, we thrive when we have the opportunity to share relatedness in which our physical, social, and emotional well-being are taken care of.

Therefore, based on my background, I naturally desire a sense of belonging within a community, wherever I find myself. As an international doctoral student at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, I research how to help students find their voices through writing. One of my main goals is to find and belong to communities where I can use my chosen field of study to positively impact the university community. The Laboratory of Academic Literacy (LLAC) provided that space and opportunity. LLAC is a writing center providing writing support through tutors and tutees’ collaborative efforts in English, French, and Portuguese to staff, graduate, and postgraduate students of the university community. LLAC provides a *non-judgmental* tutoring environment that embraces tutees and tutors despite their difficulties, race, gender, and personality.

However, in becoming a tutor at LLAC, one fear I had was whether LLAC recognized the importance of tutors’ care and emotional well-being, which is

paramount for productivity. I began to overcome this fear from the first meeting I had with the writing center's administrators and fellow tutors. I walked into a room filled with strangers and was met with smiles, hugs, and pecks on the cheeks welcoming me into the group. Everyone was concerned about my settling into the university system. They were willing to extend a hand of assistance when needed in all ramifications ranging from course registration, research, accommodation, childcare, and healthcare, among others. The reception for me was a strong indication of acceptance. I realized that, aside from tutoring, my well-being was also a priority.

I had found a village that could help me navigate through uncertainty and succeed in different facets of my academic journey, a unique characteristic of LACC. At LACC, priority is given to ensuring that tutors succeed and meet all institutional requirements. Like me, tutors at LLAC are postgraduate students. During the pandemic, we took the same courses and formed online study groups where we discussed, researched, and learned from each other. In LACC, we also publish academic papers together due to the publish or perish policies. For me, working in this environment ensured I had a balanced intellectual, work, and life balance. Knowing that I was supported and valued in my writing center work taught me the strength in vulnerability, and it improved my social confidence and interactions.

The Strength in Vulnerability

I remember receiving a message from the writing center's coordinator at the onset of the pandemic asking tutors how they were coping with our new, unexpected reality. It was a reminder that the writing center was open to helping tutors. This message made me realize that the writing center was not just a space or a building we occupied for tutoring but an idea from which everyone who embraced it could benefit.

As a mother of three young kids, I was thrown into a sea of confusion, fear, anxiety, and panic due to the pandemic. I needed to finish my studies, write my qualification report, be a mother, homeschool my kids, and conduct tutoring and research. This was a critical period in my life, but I felt embarrassed owning up to my challenges. However, the coordinator's message motivated me to speak to the director and fellow tutors about my challenges. Amazingly, this was the pathway toward finding solutions. I got advice from other mothers whose homes had also become offices, libraries, playgrounds, and schools. I received tutoring from fellow tutors willing to adjust their schedules to suit mine, which helped me navigate my responsibilities and made life manageable. The collaboration between other members of LLAC and me gives credence to the Yoruba proverb, "*Eniyan ni esin atileyin mi*" (humans are my support system).

The consequence of receiving the support I needed was that I was motivated to help tutees to the best of my abilities and ensure the success of the writing

center as a whole during the pandemic. I realized there was strength in vulnerability. I have learned that a bit of thoughtfulness from writing center administrators unites tutors and makes them come out of their shells, which makes it possible for them to ask for and receive the help they need. Tutors might hold onto their challenges because of the fear of being judged, as we might feel that as tutors, we ought to be perfect writers. I have also learned to access the writing center's resources to my own benefit.

Improved Social Confidence and Interaction

Belonging to a strong and supportive writing center community has improved my social confidence and interaction skills. Weekly, I encounter different students and receive them in a warm embrace. I have learned to connect with strangers within a short amount of time and make them comfortable in my company: a skill I didn't have before becoming a tutor. My patience and adaptability level have improved because I can now adapt my tutoring style to work with students with different needs. In the past, I decided who I wanted to interact with. But being a tutor, I had to learn to accommodate everyone scheduled to be tutored by me.

During one of my tutoring sessions, I worked with a doctoral student who was gloomy, visibly nervous, anxious, desperate, and confused about an article he was writing for publication. To calm him down, before we began the session, we exchanged pleasantries about our well-being, and I discussed how interesting I felt his area of research was. I could tell that he was distracted from his anxieties and happy to share his research with me. After our discussions, he seemed more relaxed discussing the purpose of the session. At the end of the session, we became friends. I was impressed that with the subsequent sessions, he grew more confident in his writing and comfortable using the writing center space as a whole.

I was able to help this tutee because I had improved my own social skills, which grew from a place of empathy and authenticity. In the past, if I had encountered such an individual, I would have found a way of avoiding communication, due to the fear of making the individual's situation worse. But my story is different today because I communicate effectively with people from various works of life. Similarly, I realize that trust is developed when we are authentic, empathetic, and perceived as competent. These qualities in my day-to-day life have helped me mitigate loneliness. I have learned to name my emotions for what it truly is without shame or fear. I have learned to share my experiences, letting tutees know they aren't alone in their struggles.

Conclusion

My experience as a tutor makes me realize that a successful writing center is not just one that provides valuable services for only its clientele, but one that prioritizes the care of tutors. In as much as I try to put my best foot forward in

everything I embark on doing, my success as a tutor springs from the fact that I feel a sense of comfort, respect, and liberty within the writing center's workplace community, which puts me in a state to engage constantly. Being part of the writing center is to belong to a community of support, full of peers and faculty aimed at seeing you succeed in all areas of life. The skills I have learned on the job are life tools that have helped me develop character, which will be relevant in my collegial, personal, and professional life.