

Metaphors and Ambivalence: Affective Dimensions in Writing Center Studies

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In “Training Tutors in Emotional Intelligence: Toward a Pedagogy of Empathy,” Noreen Lape discusses the ambivalence of writing center tutor training manuals regarding emotion, finding in them a tendency “to prepare tutors for encounters with distressed writers by defining or categorizing the problem types and suggesting how to approach them” (2). This is problematic because, as Lape notes, “without theories and concrete strategies for responding to emotions in a session, some tutor training manuals employ a rhetoric that may place new tutors in a defensive position—on alert, waiting for the inevitable problem person to arrive” (2). Unfortunately, this problem is not confined to the pages of tutor training manuals alone.

In this essay, I extend Lape’s survey into the other literature that would most likely circulate among writing center practitioners. I examined the archives of the two most prominent journals in our subfield, *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* and *The Writing Lab Newsletter (WLN)*, to see how emotion and affective dimensions have been discussed in the context of the writing center. My findings echo Lape’s: just as with tutor training manuals, these journals “concentrate far more on cognitive than affective skills” (2). And, like the training manuals Lape discusses, those articles that address emotion most directly focus almost exclusively on either disruptive behaviors associated with emotion or on what may be considered negative affective dimensions (such as anxiety or anger). I also examine the prevalence of metaphorical language in discussions of emotion and how that language has framed the way emotion has been conveyed. Finally, I explain that although some strands of the focus on negative affective dimensions linger, over time a more positive sense of emotion has begun to emerge in the literature, a sense that examines what emotion has to offer writing center sessions. This newer

sense is encouraging for those interested in studying the role emotion plays in the writing center, because there is a dearth of discussion about the affective dimensions of writing center work in these journals. In fact, in the decades of each journal's existence, there have been only a few pieces that deal directly with the subject.

METHODS AND THE WORK OF METAPHOR

I examined the archives of *WCJ* and *WLN* for a few reasons. Following Perdue and Driscoll's rationale for examining *WCJ* to understand the state of writing center research, I chose *WCJ* "because it is the only peer-reviewed professional journal with article length-manuscripts in the field. It represents a growing body of scholarship and research about writing centers and therefore offers an excellent representation of the kinds of research published within writing center studies" (12). Similarly, I chose *WLN* because of its practitioner orientation and influential status in the field. As Michael Pemberton points out, "the changes that have taken place in one have quite often been reflected by or been a reflection of changes that have taken place in the other. For this reason, then, the *WLN*—perhaps more so than any other resource—provides a unique window into the evolutionary process that has made the writing center community what it is today" (23). Thus, the archives of these two journals demonstrate larger trends regarding emotion and affective dimensions in writing center studies.

I searched the archives of *WCJ* (up to issue 34.1) and *WLN* (up to issue 39.9-10)¹, reading each issue and identifying articles devoted specifically to emotion or some affective dimension in the writing center. To define "emotion" or "affective," I used categories of affect derived from the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF). Originally designed for observing emotional behavior in the context of marital conflict, the SPAFF has since been used for "coding interactions among children, their parents, and their peers...and even to therapy situations" (Coan and Gottman 267). These codes consist of the more obvious affects such as anger, sadness, and fear as well as what may be considered less obvious affects such as humor, validation, and enthusiasm. In short, if an article's primary focus dealt explicitly with either emotion or with some affective dimension that corresponded with a SPAFF category, I examined it for its method and stance toward emotion or a given affect.²

In *WCJ*, three articles meet this criterion: Bizzaro and Toler’s “The Effects of Writing Apprehension on the Teaching Behaviors of Writing Center Tutors” [EE-N], Richard Leahy’s “When the Going is Good” [CI-P], and Steve Sherwood’s “Humor and the Serious Tutor” [CI-P]. Bizzaro and Toler’s article is an empirical piece focusing on apprehension. Leahy’s and Sherwood’s articles examine the potential benefits of positive affective dimensions. The last two articles are examples of conceptual inquiry—library-based research of the kind conducted by scholars in the humanities. Each draws on other fields to bolster arguments about the potential benefits of positive affect (Leahy) or humor (Sherwood) in the tutorial.

In *WLN* twenty-four pieces met this criterion: twenty articles and four Tutor’s Columns. Only one article (Paul Ady’s “Fear and Trembling at the Center”) was based on empirical evidence [EE-N]. Of the rest, ten could be loosely described as conceptual inquiry, and like Sherwood’s and Ady’s articles, they often borrow theory or terminology from other fields to urge a change in practice or perceptions about that practice. Nine based their main assertions on anecdotal evidence. Eleven of the *WLN* articles focused on negative dimensions of emotion or its disruptive effects: five focused on the positive, emphasizing emotion’s value; and the remaining four were neutral or ambivalent. Of the four Tutor’s Columns, all focused on the disruptive or negative dimensions of emotion (fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, etc.) and were largely anecdotal. In short, there is not much in the way of scholarship on affective dimensions in writing center work, and what there is focuses primarily on the negative aspects of emotion—little of which based on empirical evidence. Also, much of that literature on emotion used metaphors with negative connotations to describe it.

This use is problematic because, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain, “Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor.... In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies” (156). In my examination of figures and metaphors, I rely on Lakoff and Johnson’s definition of metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (5). Examining casual language about a topic can thus reveal how attitudes are informed by and perpetuate the metaphor and the paradigm it enables. Accordingly, such an examination in

discussions of emotion in writing center literature can reveal how we “live” emotion in the center—how we perceive, perform, and respond to it.

AMBIVALENCE AND METAPHOR

One of the prevailing themes throughout many of the articles posits emotion and reason as oppositional binaries that guide the subject in contrary ways, drawing on a variety of metaphors to describe emotion. According to this trope, emotion disrupts the ostensibly intellectual work of the session (Barnett [CI-A]; Dukes [CI-N]; Ware [CI-N]) or inhibits the Word/Logos or objectivity (Baker [AE-N]; Barnett [CI-A]; Major & Filetti [CI-A]; Mills [AE-A]). “Difficult” (or “problem”) and “emotional” writers are often synonymous in this conception (Ware [CI-N]; Walker [CI-N]; Sherwood, 1992 [CI-N]). Not all of these articles equated emotion overall as disruptive, but rather focused on the role emotion (or a facet of emotion) played in disrupting a session. For example, in 1981’s “Writing Lab as Crisis Center,” Thomas Dukes shares an instance of a tutoring session with a young woman “held up by her need to vent her feelings” (4) [CI-N]. The metaphors informing this construction posit emotion as steam or heat, and the session a vehicle headed in a direction but held up by an overheated engine. To address this, Dukes recommends borrowing questioning methods from crisis centers to defuse student emotions before the session can truly begin. Here, reason and the verbal alleviate the pressure of the unspoken, of feeling.

The binary between reason and emotion in other articles can be seen in other metaphors as well. For example, in “The Reading Aloud ‘aaahhhaaa,’” Kim Baker writes, “Having Lisa read to me enabled her to shift from emotion to reason as she concentrated...” (13) [AE-N]. According to this metaphor, reason and emotion are two mutually exclusive states somehow distinct from the subject, who in turn can “shift” between the two (a problematic if seemingly commonsensical position). As Baker explains, one of the benefits of her approach is that “having tutees read their own work out loud encourages independence and what many writing teachers refer to as ‘owning your writing’” (13). This metaphor posits writing as something owned and authorized by writers by dint of reason. Writing here is not an ontological, heuristic, or inventional/discovery-oriented process but rather a product—that is, it produces a product that can be owned or reclaimed.

Discussions of emotion in the articles also often draw upon metaphors that render emotion as an object external to the psyche. That is, emotion has been posited as a possession in the same way that baggage, tools, or weapons, are: as something that can be directed and occasionally harnessed. Gillian Jordan, for example, discusses humor (when “used judiciously”) as “an effective learning tool” (8) [AE-P]. Gayla Mills describes how for some indifferent writers, the act of going to the center is merely a task to be checked off a list, but asks, “what about for the others, the ones who *drag* their emotions through the door?” (10, emphasis mine) [AE-A]. Emotions—at least, negative emotions—are constructed here as a burden that can be discarded, but only if the subject so chooses.

Similarly, Sherwood (“Fear and Loathing”) describes working with a student who, disapproving of Sherwood’s suggestions, began to display his frustration affectively and overtly [CI-N]. Sherwood writes, “When my attempts to disarm him had failed, and fearing I might end the tutorial in a headlock, I suggested we continue the session another time” (“Fear and Loathing” 12, emphasis mine). This metaphor also manifests in Tracy Hudson’s 2001 Tutor’s Column titled “Head ‘em Off at the Pass: Strategies for Handling Emotionalism in the Writing Center” [AE-N]. She shares an instance of how one of her strategies successfully “handled” emotionalism, stating, “This example shows how the tutor’s actions *disarm* the student” (10, emphasis mine). In this conception, emotionalism is a weapon and the session a combat—at least until the weapon is removed from play. Seen together, these two instances from Sherwood and Hudson demonstrate how metaphors can be perpetuated and also the consequence of their use: all four of the Tutor’s Columns take on the defensive stance toward emotion Lape warns about in tutor training manuals, and more, Hudson’s column reproduces the very metaphor Sherwood used to continue to frame emotion in primarily negative terms. In short, the tutors producing these columns may internalize the metaphors practitioners and scholars use to describe emotion, and those metaphors may inform the stance they adopt in their sessions and in their discussions of sessions.

The general lack of scholarship on the affective and emphasis on the negative dimensions of emotion thus convey a certain unease or ambivalence about the subject. Unfortunately, such ambivalence can occlude the potentially generative work

that affective dimensions such as validation, humor, and even frustration perform in the tutorial. As researchers in fields such as cognition and psychology have shown, affective states are bound up in—and sometimes inseparable or indistinguishable from—cognitive and metacognitive processes (Barrett; Frijda). Similarly, work on student learning has demonstrated that affective states also play a role in problem-solving by adjusting cognitive processes (Clore and Huntsinger; D’Mello et al). So rather than being inherently disruptive or the opposite of reason, emotion actually plays an integral role in cognition.

Fortunately, other ways of understanding emotion are emerging in the literature. For example, in recent articles such as Lape’s “Training Tutors in Emotional Intelligence” [CI-P], Wilson and Fitzgerald’s “Empathic Tutoring in the Third Space,” [CI-P], and Sherwood and Childers’ “Mining Humor in the Writing Center” [CI-P], emotion is posited as an alternative way of knowing. In this sense, emotion offers another way to comprehend the world, one which can disclose certain truths that reason alone cannot. As Sherwood and Childers assert, “comical misunderstandings can lead to the sharing of laughter, which may...lead to fruitful changes in perspective” (6). Wilson and Fitzgerald draw upon this metaphor when they argue that “Although we must continue to acknowledge the professor as the audience of most of our tutees’ papers, we believe writing centers must also empathize with the audience of essay prompts—our tutees—because they have much to teach us and the faculty” (11). Here, empathy and emotion open conversation and make critique available, evening out power structures. In particular, Wilson and Fitzgerald are interested in the role empathy plays in identifying biases (ethnocentric or heteronormative, for example) that might otherwise be rationalized, normalized, or otherwise rendered unavailable for commentary. Empathy thus acts as a way to both know the emotions of the tutee as well as one’s own feelings and biases. Moreover, this knowledge can lead to agency. For example, drawing on psychologist Daniel Goleman’s concept of emotional intelligence, Lape argues, “In light of the writing center mantra, empathy leads to self-efficacy in much the same way as better writers create better papers” (6). Unlike disruptive senses of emotion, this sense of emotion does not configure or conflate it as dependence or leading to dependence. Instead, fluency with emotion is necessary for independence.

CONCLUSION

Before concluding, I wish to assert that I do not intend to denigrate the work of the authors I analyze. Rather, much of the emphasis on the disruptive elements of emotion in these texts comes from a desire to account for and help others address disruptive behaviors in the center ethically and mindfully. However, my examination demonstrates the need for more empirical work and more nuanced examinations of affect and emotion in the writing center. Even with the emergence of newer and more encouraging ways to conceptualize emotion in the tutorial, we need to study and more adequately articulate the role it plays. If writers characterize an entire range of human experience in overly simplistic metaphors, those very metaphors may limit our ability to meaningfully engage that experience: “emotional” writers will continue to be “difficult” or “disruptive.” If, on the other hand, we continue to cultivate and critically examine metaphors as shorthand to positively frame and identify the work of emotion, we may find new and exciting ways of conceiving that work.

1. These issues were current to the date of the writing of this article.

2. When I have cited a text that falls within these parameters, I have included two codes after each in brackets: the first corresponding to the sort of inquiry (CI=Conceptual Inquiry, EE=Empirical Evidence, AE=Anecdotal Evidence) and the second to its stance on emotion or affect (N=Negative, A=Ambivalent, P=Positive).



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