

Feminist Mothering: A Theory/Practice for Writing Center Administration

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If there is anything that I have learned in my time [as a tutor in the Writing Center], it is the way that spaces can influence and shape your experiences. I have spent 5 semesters in this space, learning to listen, to ask questions, to be empathetic, and to be confident. The Writing Center has been the central site of my growth throughout my undergraduate career, and I will forever be grateful for the family that this space provided me. These orange couches will continue to be my favorite place on campus. - Tutor Post on Facebook (April 29, 2016)

In my first year as a new writing center director, I found myself in an unusual meeting. Somehow, one of our State Representatives had heard from one of her constituents that our writing center, newly renovated and now directed by a tenure track faculty member, had recently declined in quality from the service it had been providing. Our writing center tutors were not editing students' papers for them. Rather, under my leadership, tutors were simply talking to students about their writing. And that talk, she heard, was all about feelings. She reported this narrative to our president, concerned about the direction our student support was heading. Fortunately, a colleague who knows the representative orchestrated a meeting so that we could explain that while we do not edit students' papers (such an action would not help students learn or develop as writers), our work with students covers much more than simply their "feelings" about writing. Somewhat surprised at how committed we are to our pedagogy, the representative agreed to talk to us. She now has a better understanding of why our tutors work with writers in conversation rather than with a red pen. But the experience troubles me; having the work of a writing center described as "just talking about feelings" diminishes and devalues what I believe is central to a necessary pedagogy writing centers offer in today's university systems.

My experience reflects the devaluation of writing center work

that for years scholars have connected to the feminization of writing centers. Over twenty years ago, Mary Trachel noted, "To the extent that writing centers are constructed as feminized worksites they risk . . . containment and separation from the academic marketplace, where the value of real, 'intellectual work' is negotiated" (32).¹ More recently, Melissa Nicolas warns against the feminization of the center, arguing that our reputation as "nurturing service-oriented places" is problematic since this "'feminization of the writing center narrative' functions to 'code the position of the writing center director as 'inferior,' regardless of rank" (12). Jackie Grutsch McKinney, placing the narrative of writing centers as "cozy home" as the "most firmly entrenched" part of our grand narrative (20), notes that this domesticated narrative can lead to the devaluation of writing center directors:

Whether female directors have carved themselves a home in the writing center (an argument I'm not prepared to make) or centers have been labeled "feminine" and thus seen as inferior by others, clinging to the identity of a writing center as cozy home may be problematic in terms of gender. Female directors who insist on cozy, inviting spaces may be unwittingly narrating their work as not intellectual in the eyes of some. Fact is, *if the writing center is a home and staff is family, that makes the director the mother.* (26, emphasis added)

I know that in an environment of corporatized academies,² any ties to domestication may prove dangerous. Any analogies to writing center as home or a director's work as mothering work in an institutional system revering a production model has the potential to diminish writing centers to a subservient position. But, while deconstructing our grand narrative, Grutsch McKinney asks us to imagine what doors narratives close as well as open. I wonder what doors we close if we abandon "writing center as home," and our work as "nurturing work." Could the caregiving work of writing centers, caregiving Trachel ties to our roots, be vitally necessary in university systems where students often experience intense stress to keep up with the pace of capitalistic production? Could our "mothering" work be essential in resisting the patriarchal culture of our academic institutions?

I resist the silencing of my mother identity both at home and in the center. What some might call the mothering work of the writing center fulfills me and empowers me. I find joy in creating a space where student writers struggle to find their own voice, a messy space that allows growth and development of writers and

tutors, a space that works alongside the classroom space, but that does not replicate that space. The Facebook post that begins this article, a post made by one of our tutors prior to graduation, suggests that our familial, “homey” space, a space shaped by our own insistence on listening, encouraging, nurturing, is indeed an important space to many. Rather than silencing or rejecting the identity of “feminine” space, I would like to see writing centers reclaim our nurturing (mothering) work as empowering, vital work within the institution. Applying the theory of feminist mothering developed by Andrea O’Reilly, I argue that by infusing the principles of feminist mothering into our own theorization of writing center administration, writing center directors empower writing center work and resist the neoliberal, patriarchal production of the institution.

FEMINIST MOTHERING: A THEORY/PRACTICE FOR ADMINISTRATION

In Adrienne Rich’s powerful exploration of her own experience as mother, she differentiates between two “meanings of motherhood” (13). The first reflects the institution of motherhood as experienced within patriarchal culture, a culture that “for most of what we know as the ‘mainstream’ of recorded history, has ghettoized and degraded female potentials” (13). She juxtaposes “motherhood” against the experience of “mothering,” one rooted in “the biological potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life” (13). Writing center directors may see parallels in Rich’s experience and their own in a university system that focuses on production and outcomes, devaluing, as Shari Stenberg notes, “learning processes that entail engagement of (an often recursive) process, collaboration and dialogue among learners, and reflection” (8). Our insistence that writing centers not be recognized as domesticated, feminized spaces speaks to our feelings of degradation.

Responding to the space that Rich opened up for a new discourse on motherhood, mothering theorists like O’Reilly have begun to explore other narratives that empower rather than diminish the mothering experience. The practice/theory O’Reilly calls *feminist mothering* offers a discourse that reclaims power for the mother and “so provides a promising alternative to the oppressive institution of patriarchal motherhood” (“Introduction” 4). As such, feminist mothering acts as a negation of motherhood as institution, allowing women to be both feminists and mothers. Recognizing that it is a tension-filled term, O’Reilly defines “feminism” within the context of feminist mothering as a “recognition that

most (all?) cultures are patriarchal and that such cultures give prominence, power, and privilege to men and the masculine and depend on the oppression, if not disparagement of women and the feminine” (8). “Feminist mothering may refer to any practice of mothering that seeks to challenge and change various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limited or oppressive to women” (“Feminist Mothering” 796).

In a similar vein to O’Reilly, composition scholar Stenberg argues that repurposing feminine practices (and I would argue through repurposing empowering feminine practices) within the neoliberal institution is vital for students. Stenberg notes the importance of understanding “education as a complex, relational practice” in helping our students become active participants in shaping their worlds (8). The writing center, a space where feminine practices like listening, reflection, and collaboration are nurtured, can be one of those spaces. I am interested in how thinking through the theory/practice of feminist mothering opens a space for administrators to speak a new discourse that rejects devaluation of our feminine practices, empowers our nurturing work, and resists the silencing of feminine values in the production model of the neoliberal institution.

In theorizing how we can empower the nurturing work of writing centers and writing center administration, I draw from three principles O’Reilly sees replicated in the mothering practices of feminist mothers. First, feminist mothers reject the patriarchal assumption that a mother’s identity is solely that of mother. Resisting the erasure of identity beyond mother-self, feminist mothers insist on work identities, partner identities, activist identities; in addition, they do not limit the identity of mother to the biological, heterosexual mother. Secondly, feminist mothers insist on shared parenting, rejecting the institutional doctrine that the mother must be the sole caretaker of the children. Carework is shared by partners, by friends, by family, and through daycare. Finally, feminist mothers believe that mothering work is not limited to the private, domestic sphere, but rather that motherwork is social and political. The political work of these mothers occurs not only in the advocacy for all peoples, but also in the raising of children with feminist values.

IDENTITY BEYOND MOTHER/DIRECTOR

The first principle of feminist mothering I draw from speaks to the multidimensionality of writing center administrators’ work and identities. O’Reilly notes that “feminist mothering does not restrict or reduce a woman’s identity and purpose solely to moth-

erhood" ("Feminist Mothering" 818). I argue that cultivating a multidimensional identity is necessary not only for mothers but also for writing center administrators.

In my motherwork with my children, I have often insisted that the cultivation of my identity beyond wife and mother is essential both to my health and to my children's. Yes, I am often tired. Yes, I am often torn between the professional work I need to do and the time I want to spend with my children. Amber Kinser calls this inherent tension of a mother who has relationships with people other than her children "relating-in-multiplicity" (125). This same tension exists in the writing center. The nature of my work as a writing center director means that I must also balance multiple relationships and identities; there are constant meetings. And my faculty line means I must find time away from the center to engage in research and writing. My time away is often confusing not only to tutors but to others outside our center who do not realize my role is multidimensional. But, as developing my selfhood through work beyond my children is valuable to them, my insistence on research and on other relationships makes visible for others in the institution the intellectual work that is a part of directing a center. Through my insistence on self-outside the "mother-role" of the writing center, I empower our work as intellectual, valuable work within the institution.

INSISTENCE ON SHARED PARTNERSHIP

Another principle from feminist mothering that speaks to writing center administration occurs in the insistence of shared partnerships. In order for mothers to invest "time and energy to develop a selfhood beyond motherhood," feminist mothering insists "upon real, shared parenting (partner, daycare, othermothering, etc.) and critique[s]. . . the excessive child-centeredness of intensive mothering" ("Feminist Mothering" 818). Writing centers, often dubbed the "fix-it shops" of writing, are used to having students sent our way so that we can do the work (nurturing work?) of improving or fixing their "lack of development" as writers. Michael Pemberton, for example, notes the danger of the "marriage" between writing centers and writing in the disciplines faculty members, echoing the often heard excuse that other faculty "don't have time to teach writing" (120).

We know to resist this "fix-it shop" mentality. And we know that writing center theory grounds itself in theories of collaboration. Michele Eodice even asks us to "demand collaboration" as a means to "reach others in ways that can impact policy, influence administrative and institutional leaders, and help us grow lead-

ers from among our writing center fellows” (129). But collaboration often results in one entity being subsumed by another, or into what Katrina Powell and Pamela Takayoshi call “missionary activism, “when one takes on the identity of “service provider” or “savior,” to act as “the one in control, the paternal figure who knows best when to intervene” (395-396). My colleague Doug Downs and I have coined the term “collaboricity,” a combination of “collaboration” and “reciprocity” to reflect shared partnership, an acknowledgement of both the independence and interdependence of writing programs and writing centers (forthcoming 2016). This idea of shared partnership—educators working sometimes together, sometimes independently—reflects the insistence of feminist mothering that care of children cannot solely lie on the mother’s shoulders. Helping our students grow and develop (which sometimes means listening to their feelings) must be a shared enterprise.

MOTHERING AS POLITICAL/ACTIVIST ROLE

But feminist mothering does more than simply empower mothers and motherwork. In outlining the theory of feminist mothering, O’Reilly insists that feminist mothers make better mothers. Through teaching feminist values to their children, making mothering activist work, feminist mothers allow “children to grow outside and beyond the gender straightjackets of patriarchal culture” (“Feminist Mothering” 811). Children develop empathy, care, acceptance. O’Reilly notes that in developing these values, children may find themselves at odds with their peers who hold to patriarchal values. She notes that feminist mothers “must teach our children not only to resist patriarchy but more importantly how to keep safe and sane in so doing” (“Feminist Mothering” 811).

Writing center administrators often advocate for teaching values indicative of feminist values. Sarah Blazer’s recent article on a “cohesive, transformative staff education” program that orients staff “to issues of difference” and develops inclusivity (17) is just one example; Tracy Santa’s article on listening is yet another. In my role as director, I want to create a space for writers to find their voices, and I want my tutors to have voice, too. In a sense, I want to “raise my tutors” to have feminist values.

Feminist values often come through in my insistence that those of us in the writing center must take both reflective and reflexive stances, that we must practice what Krista Ratcliffe describes as rhetorical listening. Confronting different viewpoints through rhetorical listening can be unsettling at times, particularly as one both listens empathetically and stands firm in one’s own identity.

As Grutsch McKinney notes, “[Feminist] work does not have to be ‘comfortable’ . . . and in fact, might work better if it is confrontational and unsettling” (27). I do want tutors to be safe and sane in their work. But in the sometimes unsettling work, I have seen tutors begin to develop empathy for others and confidence in themselves. The Facebook quote beginning this article speaks to both, as does our center’s recent panel of past tutors who joined us to talk to current tutors about what they had taken from their writing center work into their lives beyond the university. Over and over they mentioned empathy. Confidence and empathy—what more could we want?

CONCLUSION

I hear voices cautioning me about creating too much of a “mothering” space, of being too “mothering” in my interactions with tutors and student writers. I hear those cautions, and I heed them. These are known dangers. Feminist mothering provides a theory/practice by which I can embrace the nurturing/motherwork of the writing center while resisting the patriarchal trappings in the domestication of motherhood. And through empowering the nurturing work of the writing center, the practice of feminist mothering provides me a means by which to resist the neoliberal values that are shaping our institutions. By thinking through administration through the lens of feminist mothering, I believe writing center directors can embrace the nurturing work that we do, using our feminist values to, as Stenberg argues, intervene in our increasingly neoliberal institutions.

NOTES

1. Traschel’s article not only gives a thorough review of the feminization of writing center work but also provides a positive comparison between mothering work and writing center administration.
2. See Slaughter and Rhoades on the corporatization of the university.



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