

# Religious Identity and Writing Center Tutoring: Perceptions from Latter-day Saint (LDS) Tutors

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Although robust conversations on race, class, gender, and sexual identity have emerged within writing center studies, religion as a category of identity remains largely unexamined. This is not the case for composition studies. Surveying the past twenty-five years of research on students' religious beliefs and experiences, Paul Lynch and Matthew Miller conclude that the field has taken religion seriously. While the "problematic religious student" informs a strand of past scholarship, more of it reflects scholars and teachers practicing "widespread sensitivity and self-critical awareness," using encounters with students' religious beliefs "as opportunities to interrogate their own assumptions" (Lynch and Miller). Highlighting how current research rejects both the notion that "religious faith is a threat to academic discourse" and the tendency to "reduc[e] religious speech to its most reactionary articulations," Lynch and Miller conclude that composition is pursuing "a wider and more diverse understanding of faith." Yet, the discipline still knows too little "about our students' actual beliefs and practices"—an observation that, we believe, applies to students working in writing centers.

Existing writing center scholarship typically focuses on students' religious beliefs in writing consultations (Parker; for an exception, see Fitzgerald). As directors of writing centers in Utah, our institutional contexts compel us to acknowledge the impact of religious beliefs and practices on our writing tutors, particularly those who identify as Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormons. Long considered a minority religion in the Christian tradition with a misunderstood theology and a history of persecution, the LDS Church has received increased media attention recently, notably during Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign. A 2015 Pew Research Center study indicates that, while Americans are becoming less religious, Latter-day Saints remain one of the most religiously

observant groups in the United States (Pew Research Center 11). Knowing that religious identity featured prominently in many of our tutors' lives, we conducted an exploratory, cross-institutional study to examine tutors' perceptions of how their religious identity influences their work as writing tutors.

Following IRB approval, we interviewed eleven undergraduate LDS peer tutors at our respective writing centers: Westminster College, a small, secular comprehensive private university in Salt Lake City, UT; and Brigham Young University (BYU), a large, religiously affiliated private university in Provo, UT. Nine writing tutors at BYU were interviewed by David; two writing consultants at Westminster were interviewed by Chris. Participants were 20 to 26 years old and members of the LDS Church, most for their entire lives; their Church-sponsored service opportunities ranged from teaching Sunday School to completing 18-to-24-month proselytizing missions. We asked 13 questions that prompted tutors to consider how various factors—religious identity, LDS beliefs or practices, Church-sponsored service opportunities, institutional mission—were relevant to tutoring, including working with students on religious writing.<sup>1</sup> The interviews, which lasted 15-45 minutes, were semi-structured, allowing us to probe responses while permitting comparison across interview data (Bernard and Ryan 29). We analyzed interview transcripts using a holistic coding method, manually and independently coding each interview before comparing analyses to refine our codes and categories (Saldaña 142-43).

In this article, we highlight two contrasting findings: 1) tutors we interviewed perceive their religious beliefs and experiences as compatible with or highly relevant to writing center praxis; 2) when consulting on religious writing, tutors who were interviewed elide differences in religious beliefs by discussing academic rhetoric. Despite a small sample size ( $n=11$ ), these findings suggest that LDS tutors experience a productive, though somewhat conflicting, relationship between religious and academic identities and discourses. As such, these findings support Lynch and Miller's observation about the compatibility of religious faith and academic discourse, which compels us to urge writing center professionals to see religion as a category of identity that merits increased attention and research.

Before proceeding, we wish to emphasize that many of the eleven tutors noted the challenge of considering their religious identity apart from their holistic identities. One explained,

I feel like it's kind of hard to separate [religious identity and writing center work] because I feel like both of them are an important part of who I am or how I would describe myself. I don't feel like there's, you know, there is me who is LDS and then there's me who's a writing tutor and that they are separate, compartmentalized people. I feel like both of them are part of who I am. There are other aspects of me, too, you know, me the astronomy major, the kid who likes to go hiking, and all that stuff. (Interview 6)

Another of the tutors who were interviewed explained, "I like to think that the way I live my religion is kind of more a part of who I am versus something that I have to consciously think about" (Interview 5). Because religious belief is central to these tutors' holistic identities, it inevitably influences their writing center work, but the degree of that influence is often inconspicuous. Hence, these tutors did not construe writing center tutoring, or their roles as tutors, as inherently religious. Further, we acknowledge the potential bias in our research from asking tutors to consider connections between their religious experiences and tutoring. However, two factors—our lack of hypotheses about tutors' responses, and the fact that several tutors made similar connections independently of each other—suggest that we tapped a topic many tutors had already considered and, in several cases, discussed with each other long before we invited them to participate in this research.

### **MORAL VALUES AND WRITING CENTER PRAXIS**

When asked which LDS beliefs or practices influenced how they work with writers, nearly all tutors appealed to such moral values as kindness, friendliness, and encouragement; several mentioned respect and service, and some mentioned humility, mercy, and love. These values are not unique to Christianity or religious belief systems since they feature in "natural" virtue ethics. However, they do express a Christian focus on love of others as a primary virtue, traditionally expressed as "*caritas*, charity, or self-sacrificing love" (Lawler and Salzman 444, 465–6). The following response represents how these tutors typically connected their religious beliefs and writing center tutoring:

[B]eing kind and encouraging and supportive are very, like, important tenets of LDS practice [. . .]. [A]nd teaching is also a really big part [... that] plays out in writing center practices. [B]eing direct but, uh, not always directive, I guess, in teaching, in always trying to be kind and understanding and sympathetic as you're offering suggestions. [...] Learning to love people as soon as you meet them, I think, is also an important part of tutoring. (Interview 4)

As illustrated, these tutors often expressed moral values alongside normative principles of writing center praxis. Many stressed the importance of valuing and engaging each writer and offering individualized support and validation. Several associated their roles as collaborative peers with a sense of selfless service and respect for a writer's ability and autonomy. While references to nondirective tutoring methods, which were common, likely reflected tutors' training and exposure to writing center literature, tutors also implied that such methods were vital to preserving students' agency<sup>2</sup> and their development as writers. Further, while nearly all of the interviewees paraphrased Stephen North's axiom "that we aim to make better writers, not necessarily—or immediately—better texts" (441), tutors often implicitly infused "better" with a moral meaning (i.e., hoping the interaction would help writers become better people, or better off than they were before).

These tutors' responses reveal how notions of love and service, inspired by religious beliefs and experiences, intersect with the collaborative, nonhierarchical ethos of writing center praxis. Many of these tutors see writing conferences as an individualized and humanizing encounter with a writer and effective tutoring as setting aside one's own agenda. Their responses reinforce many "mandates from writing center lore": tutors should "make students feel comfortable during conferences," "provide positive feedback," "act more as peers than instructors," "avoid using directive tutoring strategies," and "lead students to answer their own questions" (Thompson et al. 83). While Isabelle Thompson et al. and other writing center scholars point to the lack of empirical evidence to substantiate some of these dictates, our research documents that tutors share these values and appeal to them as norms for their writing center praxis. In these instances, religious values may reinforce such writing center norms.

### **INVOKING LDS BELIEFS AND MISSION EXPERIENCES**

When prompted to identify relevant religious beliefs or practices unique to the LDS Church, many of these tutors referred explicitly or implicitly to two aspects of LDS doctrine: the divine heritage and potential of each person as a child of God, and the role of learning in furthering one's eternal progression. These aspects are grounded in a central tenet of LDS theology, that the purpose of life on Earth is to experience joy and prepare for exaltation in the hereafter by living the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and that anyone, through Christ's grace and individual effort, may eventually attain an exalted, God-like state.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, one's choices, experiences, and relationships can have far-reaching implications. In the context of LDS Church-sponsored education, which aims

to integrate spiritual and secular learning, tutors see their work as a broader form of service that can move beyond helping students improve as writers and promote students' personal development, learning, and, albeit indirectly, spiritual progression.<sup>4</sup> One tutor, acknowledging that the correlation was somewhat strained, drew a parallel between divine potential and writing development: "[E]veryone is a writer and everyone has writing potential that they can reach. And we're [writing tutors] here to help them along that way and find that potential, find their strengths, find their weaknesses, and help them be the best writer that they can [be]" (Interview 11).

Institutional context certainly shapes tutors' perceptions of writing centers as sites of service and learning. However, our interviewees attributed less influence on their tutoring from institutional or Church contexts and more from their experiences as missionaries, often drawing extensive comparisons. When asked to elaborate on the impact of missionary experiences, many of the interviewed tutors discussed (1) opportunities to encounter and learn from differences and/or (2) training in and experience using teaching strategies. These tutors described their missions as opportunities to encounter, respect, and learn from differences in ideas, cultures, identities, and experiences. They felt these encounters had helped foster greater awareness, open-mindedness, sympathy, and tolerance, which influenced how they viewed and worked with writers. One tutor, who was a missionary in Russia, explained,

I was interacting with people that had such different experiences from mine and at the beginning of my mission I often felt like, "You know, yes, I don't understand," but I would resent that people would be like, "You're just a young American that has everything," [. . .] and I started to feel towards the end of my mission that I could validate their experiences a lot more and validate their feeling of my lack of understanding. Like, I just became very aware of how much I could learn from them, and that is something I think about when I'm tutoring. (Interview 3)

These tutors also frequently noted overlap between writing tutor training manuals and teaching methods from the LDS missionary training manual, which includes a chapter on effective teaching skills with guidelines for building rapport and trust, adapting content to meet individual needs, explaining concepts clearly, asking effective questions, actively listening, and understanding and resolving concerns. Readers familiar with writing center praxis may see parallels in such manuals as *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (17-28) and *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* (28-29). Asking questions was the most common overlap these tutors mentioned between teaching experiences as missionaries and as tutors. As one tutor, who was a missionary in Japan, explained,

[A]s a missionary I feel like [...] my most successful teaching moments were when I asked the right questions and the people we were teaching were able to find answers for themselves or, I guess, come up with their own beliefs instead of us telling them what to believe, and I feel like writing tutoring is the same where you can ask certain questions and they don't help, or you can ask other questions and they make something click. (Interview 7)

While beliefs and practices differ greatly among religions, even among branches of the same religion, identifying connections between religious and academic contexts demonstrates that the former can bring new paradigms to the latter. For instance, these tutors' characterization of asking questions, derived from their missionary experiences, often eschewed the directive/non-directive paradigm of typical writing center praxis and instead focused on whether questions facilitated learning.

### **NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES IN BELIEFS BY ATTENDING TO ACADEMIC RHETORIC**

In response to questions about consulting on religious writing, all tutors mentioned encountering differences of belief. Westminster tutors generally discussed working with non-LDS or formerly LDS writers, while many BYU tutors identified encountering differences of belief with fellow LDS writers. Several noted that addressing these differences was particularly challenging or complicated: These tutors didn't want to offend students or undermine their beliefs but also wanted to challenge students' thinking, especially when tutors felt that students were expressing their beliefs in simplistic or dogmatic ways. In describing their responses to these situations, the tutors often expressed a desire to avoid imposing their beliefs and instead focused on understanding and strengthening students' writing.

One tutor participant explained that tutoring religious writing at times confronted him with assumptions and arguments he found problematic:

It's definitely interesting because you run up against new ideas that make you think about, or that make me think about what I believe. [S]ometimes you will hear something and you'll think, "Is that really how it is? Do I agree with that?" And you just have to remove yourself from it and [...] view it almost not as religion [but] almost as you would any other subject and look at their ideas and the structure of their arguments and how they present it rather than the actual content of what they are saying. (Interview 6)

The tutor added, "I'm always kind of worried about telling students, 'Oh, this is wrong' or 'You need to'—I don't want to come across as,

‘Oh, your belief is wrong or invalid,’” and related an experience of encountering a different interpretation of scripture but refraining from commenting on the content; rather, he made suggestions for clarifying and strengthening the student’s position (Interview 6).

Expressing similar misgivings, another tutor explained, “I try to be really—how do I say this?—not removed from the content, but my personal religious views are often pretty different than the things [students] are saying [. . .] I try not to comment specifically on areas of testimony or on content too much when it’s really religious because I feel like most of the time that’s kind of dangerous ground. I often disagree with the things, or I just feel like that’s kind of cultural rather than doctrinal” (Interview 9). This tutor described deferring questions about content, such as Church doctrine, to a TA or a professor and instead focusing on answering questions about the student’s writing.

The tendency of tutors in our study to emphasize academic rhetoric as a way to help students strengthen faith-based arguments without directly engaging in differences in belief, whether grounded in religious or academic discourse, reflects a common trope in scholarship on religion in the writing classroom and the writing center (Parker). This tendency, likely motivated by the notion that religious and academic rhetoric are mutually exclusive, may have inhibited the tutors we interviewed from engaging in challenging but potentially productive conversations that stem from openly acknowledging differences of belief. We interpret this tendency as a lost opportunity, and we encourage writing center professionals to model ways of understanding and engaging with differences of belief by treating religion as a legitimate category of identity and by replacing the stereotype of the “problematic religious student” with research-driven accounts of how tutors’ and students’ actual religious beliefs and practices inform their experiences in the writing center.

## NOTES

1. For this study, religious writing was understood broadly as writing produced in an academic context on some aspect of religious doctrine, practice, or experience, typically through the lens of LDS theology.

2. In LDS theology, agency refers to an individual’s God-given right to choose and to act for one’s self. Tutors’ use of the term evokes the norm of writing center praxis that aims to preserve students’ autonomy as writers and ownership of their writing.

3. For an overview of basic LDS beliefs, consult the Church’s Articles of Faith: <[www.lds.org/topics/articles-of-faith](http://www.lds.org/topics/articles-of-faith)>.

4. To understand how BYU imagines the integration of faith and learning, see BYU’s mission statement and aims documents: <[aims.byu.edu](http://aims.byu.edu)>.



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