

Tutors' Column: "Shared Identities, Diverse Needs"

Sacha-Rose Phillips
Carleton College



SACHA-ROSE PHILLIPS

As a tutor who is a black immigrant and a second language writer (SLW), I recognize that my own identities influence my perceptions of writers and the approaches I use in conferences. This recognition should come as no surprise; scholars have discussed how writing isn't only about conveying content and ideas, but "is a representation of self" (Ivanič 373). Yet, I don't believe we in the

writing center community have explored adequately how our identities can impact the dynamics of a consultation. My differing experiences with two students, Gina and Kalie, illustrate why a critical awareness of identity, while important, shouldn't replace the need to listen to each writer's particular concerns.

On a busy Thursday at our campus cafe, I waited for my consultee, Gina, a Nigerian immigrant and a second language writer. I looked forward to the session, which promised to be relatively easy. A bubbly sophomore, Gina always had a positive remark or funny story to share. We had developed a cordial relationship in part because our life experiences were so similar, and we had mutual academic and social interests. This Thursday, we planned to work on some papers we had already reviewed, which had received detailed feedback from her professors. I assumed Gina was only meeting with me to ensure she hadn't missed a grammatical error or miscited a source. However, as soon as I saw Gina, I knew something was wrong. When I asked whether she was okay, she said "yes," but her body language suggested otherwise: her shoulders were hunched and she let out an audible sigh.

As we worked, I realized that Gina's papers required more work than I had anticipated. When I made suggestions or pointed out areas for improvement, she grew visibly frustrated. She said she was embarrassed and claimed she was "a horrible writer." Gina lamented the fact that she came from an underfunded high school where she hadn't learned to express her ideas well through writ-

ing. I could completely relate to her sentiments: my first semester at college was particularly challenging. I had lost confidence when I received less than stellar feedback on my work, but I still chose to revise my papers. However, during the revision process, I didn't seek help from my professors or use available resources, as I was afraid others would think my writing was "terrible," even after multiple attempts to improve it.

I shared my experiences with Gina and admitted that my anxieties persisted even as my writing improved. Initially, Gina met my admissions with eye rolls and guffaws of disbelief. She thought that my writing consultant position meant I was somehow blessed with perfect writing ability. As I opened up about my educational background, my challenges with writing, and how I had addressed them, Gina grew more inclined to listen to feedback about her work. As the conversation ended, she expressed confidence that she could revise her papers again based on our discussion of them. Although our conference had focused less on organization or grammatical errors, it created a space where Gina learned to closely examine her experiences through writing. More broadly, this space became what Gloria Anzaldúa would call a "borderland" for Gina, one in which she could speak of and explore the ways in which her identity and experiences informed her writing. In such a "borderland," students need not assimilate to the academic conventions of writing. Rather, students should be able to navigate and reconcile their own personal identities with the expectations of writing in academia (Anzaldúa). Making this shift in focus from perfecting the conventions of academic writing to using academic writing to amplify her thoughts, experiences, and attitudes was productive and valuable for Gina. From then on, I intentionally tried to make the same shift with each new student I helped, particularly with students of color and/or immigrants like me. I found that each student was able to recognize the value and inherent knowledge they brought to the writing center even if their writing style or skill level didn't meet the demands of a rigorous liberal arts college curriculum. My changed perspective also ensured that students' expectations (not teachers') were centered in the writing process and our discussions. This approach was successful, I thought, until I met Kalie, a sophomore and another SLW.

Unlike Gina, Kalie, who was from China, hadn't lived in the United States before coming to Carleton College. Still, I believed our shared foreign-born and multilingual status would provide the context for a positive working relationship. I assumed our shared

identities meant we shared writing insecurities. During our sessions, Kalie tended to be very critical about her writing. As was the case with Gina, I tried to encourage and motivate her. Even with papers that needed lots of work, I always sought to give positively constructed feedback. Kalie tended to counter my affirming comments by emphasizing that her use of grammar was poor. I thought such comments meant Kalie lacked confidence or that, like Gina, she felt embarrassed about her writing. On one occasion, I said something like, “Kalie, your writing is quite clear. I believe your point here is well developed, but if you change the structure of this sentence, the importance of the idea in your paper would be more apparent.” Because I was hyper-focused on providing affirmation, I didn’t realize I had contradicted myself: I had told Kalie that her idea was “quite clear,” while I had also said her argument needed to be “more apparent.” And I hadn’t highlighted what made the sentence poorly structured. Kalie became visibly confused and asked me to identify what exactly needed to be changed to make her writing clearer.

Kalie explained that she was trying to tease out how to correct *specific* problems in her writing so that she would not repeat them. In attempting to provide the general affirmation I assumed she needed, I was inadvertently dismissing her actual concerns. I hadn’t given Kalie the tools to work on problems she had identified in her writing. Instead of addressing her writing challenges, I had attempted to address her feelings by trying to ensure she didn’t feel the way I had felt when I first began writing in college. Eventually I recognized that other, less-visible factors were at play (e.g., our differing educational and class backgrounds) and that these factors influenced our vastly different expectations for each writing conference. While Kalie and I both discussed how our respective high schools were demanding, rigorous, and critical, our perceptions of those experiences differed. I still physically cringe when I think about some of the feedback I received as a young high school writer, and revision remains the most anxiety-ridden aspect of my writing process. Kalie, on the other hand, didn’t perceive critical feedback as negative commentary on her ability or identity as a writer. For her, criticisms were simply an indication that she could produce better quality work. In conferences, she didn’t need an encouraging spiel from me; rather, she needed and wanted clear advice about what could be improved in her papers.

In many ways, I projected my own experiences as an immigrant and SLW onto other SLWs I tutored. It took me a while to realize that although Gina, Kalie, and I are all SLWs, the way each of

us uses English differs. I have adopted a passive, Minnesota-nice communication style. Gina is quite verbose and expressive, while Kalie is much more matter-of-fact and direct. My conversations with Gina and Kalie taught me that a variety of factors can influence the extent to which writers feel personally connected to their work, including language identity, social class, and academic discipline. Though uncertain, Kalie suggested that because she is working mostly on technical, scientific papers, her writing doesn't require her to focus on herself or her experiences, and that may explain why she is less inclined than Gina and me to take criticisms of her work personally.

Given my experiences with Gina, I'm confident that when I share particular aspects of my identity and experiences with some writers, they feel more comfortable working with me, which facilitates productive conferences. And, my experiences with Kalie helped me become less inclined to ask only how a writer is feeling about a paper. In making assumptions based on the perceived identities and feelings of writers, as I did when I assumed Kalie needed my constant validation of her writing skills, tutors run the risk of invalidating writers' concerns and overlooking their most pressing educational needs. I now see it is essential to ask writers to lay out their expectations and specific concerns. We tutors need to continuously center not only the identities of writers but also their expressed needs.



WORKS CITED

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