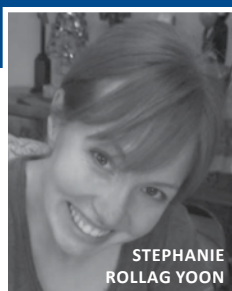


Rose's Writing: The Generative Power of Affect in a High School Writing Center

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Twelfth-grader Rose frequently visited the Lakes High School Writing Center we co-directed during the 2014-2015 school year.¹ She regularly sought assistance with writing assignments that, like most Lakes High assignments we saw, offered little choice or creativity and addressed a narrow set of state standards that determined mastery in traditional literacy practices. When Rose came to work on these assignments in the center, she also, like all of our students, brought myriad dimensions of her writing and identity into the space. Here we describe and analyze two moments from writing consultations with Rose to offer insights into the conditions that cultivate and honor affective encounters between consultants and writers and the generative power of affect in writing center consultations.

As Literacy Education doctoral students and writing consultants at a public research university, we partnered with Lakes High, a racially and socioeconomically diverse public school in a large Midwestern urban school district, to develop and direct a writing center. While staffing the center, we also collected ethnographic data, including field/observation notes, records of students' visits, and documents (meeting agendas, school policies, etc.), and conducted informal interviews with students and teachers. We discovered that Lakes Writing Center would be a complex institutional space, and our positions there would be complicated. We were insiders and outsiders: writing center coordinators/consultants but not school district employees. In these roles, we were expected to make the center an open and welcoming space, while also monitoring and tracking who came in, from where, and for what purpose. While we saw value in knowing who used the center, the school and district pressured us to collect data that could be used to monitor and assess students and to control how students accessed and moved through the school building. In ad-

dition, we had to enforce classroom discipline policies, like prohibiting cell phone use, even though cell phones are appropriate tools for writers in an after-school environment. As we negotiated the complexity of roles, space, rules, and expectations, we observed the complicated presence of affect in the center and began asking about the role of emotions in writing processes and our consulting work.

Stephanie Jones and Cynthia Lewis each describe sociocultural literacy theories that explore the role of embodiment and emotion, recognizing how an individual's body—its sensations, movements, and feelings—are vital elements in all literacy practices, including writing. Connecting with these theorists, Noreen Lape and Daniel Lawson both explore how writing center research acknowledges the presence of emotion; they offer advice for dealing with it during consultations, while also recognizing that the relationship between writing centers and emotions is often characterized by ambivalence. In discussing affect and center work, Lawson calls for “more nuanced examinations of affect and emotion,” particularly by theorizing beyond simple metaphors or conceptualizations of emotion as primarily negative or disruptive (26).

Our interactions with students at Lakes Writing Center highlighted the opportunities that emotion offers to writing consultants, drawing attention to ways that students' identities as writers are entangled with their emotional and embodied experiences. Specifically, our interactions with Rose complicated our understanding of the affective dimension of writing because she asked us to engage directly with her emotions in ways that connected deeply to her writing practices.

Working with Rose led us to ask about affective opportunities that arise when consultants acknowledge and interact with rather than ignore or avoid a writer's emotions. Given our teaching histories, we recognized the benefits of engaging with a writer's affect, and we began to think about ways to cultivate a Lakes High Writing Center environment that would accept and honor emotional and embodied experiences. Thus, we used narrative analysis methodology in our research because it allowed us to use stories, memories, and lived experiences to examine the role of affect we experienced in writing center work with students. First, we reviewed our field notes, identified illustrative examples of affective opportunity (productive emotional moments), and reconstructed two narratives from these examples. Stanton Wortham's effort to highlight powerful social, cultural, and relational choices made in the representation of data through stories influenced our

narrative reconstructions. Then, we applied Ron Scollon's mediated discourse analysis methods to analyze these narratives. With this approach, researchers trace specific actions and what influences those actions. In our narratives we traced expressions of affect, and we found that space, relationships, and time influenced the action in each moment. Through this process, we explored affective opportunities that occurred in the writing center and considered the actions that led to those opportunities. We offer two reconstructed narratives of our interactions with Rose and discuss those affective opportunities below.

AFFECTIVE OPPORTUNITIES

The Science Poster

Entering the room quickly, Rose walked to an empty table and glanced at me (Steph), the only other person present, before spreading out her materials: bent poster paper, notebook filled with notes, and textbook. Dropping her bag on the floor, she circled the table and plopped down on the couch. After a bit, I approached Rose and asked what she was working on. Standing abruptly, Rose returned to the table and made a wide gesture across it, saying, "This. I have to get this done, like, yesterday."

"Well, let's take a look at it," I suggested, pulling up a stool.

"Right. Sure," she half-heartedly responded and began flipping through her notebook.

This exchange began a push-pull conversation in which Rose and I tried to sort out the assignment's demands, information she needed to complete it, and steps she could take to finish the project requirements. The assignment was designed to meet both course-level and district-wide goals to incorporate writing in the sciences. Rose clearly did not understand the science concepts or the assignment purpose. She did, however, want to finish and turn in the assignment. I wanted to support her in accomplishing this goal while also helping her find potential connections to and insights from the assignment.

For the next hour, our conversation followed a wave pattern, rising up and pulling down as it inched toward its final destination. Rose started in a flurry of frustration about how "dumb the assignment is," grabbed at random facts from her notebook, and inserted them in any available place. As I asked questions and paraphrased her ideas, we began a process of Rose slowing down, rereading an assignment question, and talking through what it might mean. Over time, she came to ideas she could incorporate into the poster so that the assignment eventually made sense

to her. Rose and I followed this pattern of escalating frustration, calming down to an answer, and moving back to irritation as we worked our way through the assignment elements. By the end of our shared struggle, Rose had gained some cognitive understanding of the concepts involved, but she continued to perceive the project as meaningless. Rose folded her poster in half, tucking it under her arm, looked at me and said, “Thanks Steph—for putting up with me while I’m a pain in the ass so that I can get this stupid thing done.”

Rose’s history of visits to the center allowed her to express herself honestly through movement, writing, and conversation. She might not have finished the assignment without our ongoing relationship and the shared understanding that we were going to work through the project together, a process that included the expression of emotion. The consultation approach that allowed Rose to show her frustration and the flexibility of the Lakes Writing Center enabled Rose to inhabit the space in a variety of ways.

As Rose did, many students enter writing centers feeling frustrated by assignments. Students or center staff might approach this type of situation with a desire to separate emotions from writing in an effort to efficiently meet assignment goals. Instead, Rose openly expressed her frustration through physical movement around the space and verbal expressions during our consultation. A closer look at the narrative of this moment shows how Rose needed to complete the assignment (for a class), but she *did not* need to ignore her honest, emotional response to the project (being frustrated by its explanation and process) in order to move forward with her writing. Examining this narrative highlights how, for Rose, expressing emotions like frustration provides a way into a conversation about writing. Rose eventually shifted her energies into completing the assignment, but both for us as consultants and for Rose as a writer, attending to the affective dimension meant that “progress” was not linear. Ultimately, as we welcome students’ complex ways of being into writing centers—especially into secondary writing centers that must operate within institutional rules that do not always endorse students’ complexity—we can open the space for more students like Rose.

Some students need flexibility in physical and conversational spaces to process ideas and articulate feelings about an assignment before they can make progress. While logistics often require frameworks for time, space, and communication, this narrative calls on writing centers to imagine new ways staff can facilitate the affective dimension of writing. Through a re-imagination of

what writing processes include, this moment around Rose's science poster reminds us to create opportunities to work with instead of against emotion.

The Digital Composition

The writing center was empty and quiet after school on a cold day when Rose walked in, headed straight for the comfy couches, shrugged her backpack off, and let it drop to the floor. She sank into a couch and pulled her phone from her back pocket. Her eyes were red and swollen. I (Erin) gave her a minute and then gently asked, "How are things going, Rose?"

"To be honest, I'm having a terrible day," she responded matter-of-factly, staring at her phone.

"Anything you want to talk about?" I asked.

After a long pause, Rose asked, "Do you want to watch this thing I made?" She looked at me for the first time. "I made this video for my boyfriend for our anniversary. It has pictures I edited with captions and music. I started from the beginning of our relationship but then I did them by theme. I couldn't believe how many pictures we've taken in just a few months.... Now we're in a fight again."

Rose sighed, looking at her phone, and motioned me over; I closed my laptop and joined her at the couches. We watched her video together, earbuds split between us. The cropped and edited photo compilation was a carefully crafted text, incorporating words, hearts, borders, images, and music. Some photos faded in and out, others zoomed on and off the screen. Many photos were selfies showing Rose and her boyfriend with heads tilted together, sometimes with smiles, sometimes with serious faces. We watched the video without talking, and then I asked Rose to watch it again while I asked some questions. As we talked about her choices, she described her composition process: trying out an idea, moving things around, gauging the effect, working toward an overall theme. At one point, Rose began to cry. I wondered if I should stop interrogating her and just offer silence. She wiped her cheek, saying, "It's just hard right now because he's so mad at me and I'm so mad at him." But she didn't turn off or put away the video.

Together, student and consultant made this affective interaction possible as we acknowledged and lived through the emotions Rose brought to the center. As we sank into the couch together, sharing earbuds, bent over a text, we let composing, and ourselves, be recursive, entangled, and authentic. Rose's video was the most meaningful text I had seen her produce. The vul-

nerability and trust built through our writing center staff-student relationship, and the flexibility of the center's space, despite its institutional constraints, allowed us to be spontaneous—the result was an emotional conversation about digital composition and first love.

In classroom settings, the digital slideshow Rose composed on her phone may not be considered “writing” despite the complex skills used to create it. In the center, we expanded the notion of what “counts” as writing so that Rose could engage her emotions as they related to her composing practices. This narrative offers a powerful example of how writing centers can encourage engagement with emotions as part of, not separate or a distraction from, students' writing processes.

Such affective opportunities require center staff to make choices; a different choice may possibly have engaged Rose in “transferring” her digital composition skills to her “academic” assignments. But, as Jones and Hughes-Decatur assert, emotions and their embodied expressions rarely get space in schools. Had I focused on “academic writing,” I may have positioned the affective and embodied dimensions of Rose's composition as less than. Instead, I wanted Rose to feel her emotions with her whole body, both her sadness about the fight with her boyfriend and her pride in her composition. So, I chose to respond emotionally although Rose's text wasn't crafted for me. Because “academic writing” skills already carry power, legitimacy, and authority across K-12 and post-secondary classrooms, using that moment to teach Rose how she might transfer her skills could have suggested that, without institutional validation (grades, test scores, etc.), her work lacked value. As I consider when and how writing center staff might support the transfer of composition skills across writing dimensions, I turn to student writers for guidance. If and when Rose would be interested in utilizing her digital composition skills for assignments, I would support it, and would encourage her to ask her teachers for opportunities to expand their notion of literacy practices to include digital composition. A relationship of trust between writing center staff and student writers may create opportunities to make those moves, ideally facilitated by the writers themselves. Ultimately, I want Rose to feel empowered to shape her identity as a writer to include being a maker of digital slideshows for the individual she loves.

IMPLICATIONS

Working at Lakes High allowed us to identify and understand ways the affective dimension of writing appears in writing centers and

how we can acknowledge, cultivate, and build opportunities for students to engage with their affective experiences as writers. We also discovered that acknowledging and accepting emotion can lead to inquiry and action for us as consultants. Opening space for students and consultants to navigate affective dimensions of writing together expands the possibilities of what it means to be a writer and challenges consultants to support complex, affective, and critically-minded student writer identities in our spaces. To do this, we can:

1. Develop trusting relationships. Our relationship with Rose, a frequent writing center visitor, developed over time. Reciprocity, openness, vulnerability, and acceptance were important to Rose, who was quick to distrust anyone whom she found inauthentic. Rose's persistence with the science poster work, despite her frustration, and the vulnerability required for her to share her digital composition, were predicated on the relationships she had built with us over time in the center.

2. Create writing center spaces that respond to affect. The rules, structures, and expectations of writing center spaces can be inflexible and closed, and they can thwart spontaneity and emotion. These spaces can serve to control, monitor, or manage our students' writing practices and writer identities, including their emotional and embodied responses to writing. When students live out their embodied and affective experiences in our centers, things might get messy, but staff can enter into the experience with trust that students' expressions of affect can be generative. As Rose brought and expressed her affect in the center, moments of tension became opportunities to expand her writing practices and writer identity. These moments would not have occurred if we were focused on the controlling policies of the high school and district over our desires to create an open, responsive space. Writing centers will never be void of tension, but awareness of tensions around affect in the center and deliberate responses to those tensions can enable affective opportunities.

3. Acknowledge and honor affective opportunities. Rose often expressed affect while learning: by crying, smiling, and laughing or showing anger, frustration, elation, and pride as she engaged in composition practices. What Rose produced in and through those emotions—whether science posters or digital slideshows—were complex communicative texts. We can make writing centers spaces that acknowledge and honor embodied emotion. Rather than working against emotions or attempting to manage them, consultants can affirm and share them with writers as an important part

of students' writing processes.

Ultimately, writing centers can be humanizing places where possibility and agency emerge from affective moments, even when they arise from conflict and tension. Through our interactions with Rose, we witnessed how affect presents opportunities for students to learn in a writing center and how flexibility in our relationships and the physical space of writing centers can help make emotions generative.

NOTES

1. We changed the names of the individuals and institutions discussed in this article.



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