

Writing a Conflict Counterstory: Why and How

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In the fall of 2015, the faculty body at my small, public institution gathered to see a demonstration of a web-based tutoring program the administration had newly purchased. We learned that students could not only get help in a variety of courses, but they could also submit papers online for asynchronous critique late into the night from professional tutors who were specialists in their fields. I was, at that time, beginning my fourth year as director of the Writing Center. I had worked hard to build relationships across campus so that my center might be an integral part of the university. We were doing everything we could to make ourselves relevant: we offered writing workshops in courses in Sociology, gave presentations on APA style in Exercise Science and Psychology, implemented a small studio-style supplemental instruction program, made plans to officially embed tutors in courses, and developed and hosted community Write Nights and creative writing groups. Even more encouraging, other areas of campus, such as the School of Business Administration and the Division of Student Affairs, had supported us financially. Because of them, we had our own online tutoring system, a graduate student tutor paid at a higher rate, and the funding to take the tutors to our yearly regional conference. By the fall of 2015, we even had our own small but very useful budget.

At that demonstration of the new system, though, I learned from the company's representative that *my* writing center could very well be replaced by his own. Worse, as he spoke, the faculty seemed to throw their support his way, with a friend of mine even announcing that *my* writing center could not help her students with discipline-specific writing. I panicked. If I lost faculty buy-in across the curriculum, my numbers would drop, and then what? I argued with the representative in front of everyone, and then, as people were exiting the room, I lashed out at the administrator who brought him to campus. After speaking with her, I knew that my response was accusatory, passionate, and impulsive, and it left me feeling

stranded and isolated from continued conversation and possible negotiation with key stakeholders. I just didn't know what to do about it. In retrospect, I had shut down communication because I did not have insight into how stories affect communication, particularly when emotions run high. And I think such an insight can help us all, especially those of us in writing centers who are struggling to communicate and negotiate with key stakeholders.

HOW STORIES WORK

The above story is as basic, objective, and straightforward as I can make it—and yet it is, still, not at all basic, objective, or straightforward. It is a story, but not in the sense of something fabricated or in the sense that it is *just* my perspective. It is a story in a much more complex and powerful way. Narrative theorists tell us that we use stories to help us understand our lives. We use stories to explain to ourselves what happens so that what happens makes sense to us, especially when conflict is involved. Jerome Bruner, in particular, tells us that narrative is “one of the principal forms of peacekeeping” in that it enables us to understand what happens in a conflict, even if it doesn't make the conflict go away (95).

In fact, a story may explain a conflict, but it may also entrench us in it in complicated ways. To begin, what we tell doesn't come from scratch. John Winslade and Gerald Monk write that the stories we tell about our own lives come from larger stories about many lives, from cultural stories (4). We take elements from cultural stories, overarching stories we agree on, however implicitly. These stories provide plotlines, characterizations, themes, and more. The availability of these pre-made elements makes creating our own stories easier than it would be to make up new stories entirely (Winslade and Monk 4). But we are also so constrained by the cultural stories around us that these elements can be said to be “forced on us” (Cobb, *Speaking* 23). By making our own stories feel true, sealed off, and impermeable, cultural stories function in both useful and insidious ways. On one hand, they give us a sense of belonging because we are telling similar stories as others. On the other hand, cultural stories can reinforce stories that cause or encourage harm or, sometimes, violence.¹ Take, for example, characters in a story. If a specific cultural story positions a particular country as full of “bad” people, people from that country would most likely be figured as “bad” in my personal story, and I wouldn't have to work to justify it to my listeners because, more than likely, my audience would already agree. And they'd probably support me in my assertions.

Our cultural stories, also known as grand narratives, and our personal stories are practically invisible to us most of the time,

which makes it so that we aren't aware enough to do anything about them. Often stories must be brought to the foreground in order that we can see them as stories. Then, if we think of them as stories, we can analyze them, and we can create counterstories—stories that go against, that counter, the helpful or harmful stories we tell. This isn't easy to do, but sometimes it can change the way we see to move forward, just as it would for me.

HOW TO FIND COUNTERSTORIES

In writing center scholarship, the confluence of grand narratives, belonging, and counterstories was first explored by Jackie Grutsch McKinney in *Peripheral Visions*. Grutsch McKinney names the grand narrative of writing centers as “comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing” (3). This overarching storyline dictates how we think about what we do. It functions in the useful way of giving us a sense of belonging (89). We could say that if we fit into that narrative, we feel we are part of something larger. But it functions in a not-so-useful way in that it narrows what we believe writing centers do, and this could have pretty bad consequences (5). In fact, Grutsch McKinney warns us, “If we don't dislodge the writing center grand narrative, what we now conceive of as writing center studies is going to fracture” (90). In response to the possibility of fracture, she suggests finding counterstories: “Instead of telling the story of writing centers based on what we imagine is there based on our communal habits of storying writing centers, maybe we should study closely what we do see and trace the negative space around that so we get a sense of what writing centers are not” (88). She refers to telling counterstories as “writing transgressions into the narrative” (88).

The search for counterstories is also the focus of a kind of conflict resolution called narrative mediation. Narrative mediators use strategies to help conflicting parties find stories that make it possible for them to listen and work together when their personal stories don't allow them to. In addition to writing transgressions, then, we might also use the tools of narrative mediators to make sure we hear both ourselves and each other. Their strategies, which I explain here, can aid in our own self-reflection so that we can put ourselves in a better position to communicate effectively with our stakeholders, or—at the very least—with others in our lives with whom we want to communicate.

The first strategy is to simply recognize the power of stories, especially conflict stories, because, as conflict theorist Sara Cobb emphasizes in her work, conflict stories tend to be resistant to change and counterstory, “not because persons are unwilling to resolve conflicts,” but instead because no other alternate

interpretation of the situation seems plausible (“A Narrative Perspective” 54). It is, then, not always the case that we don’t want to find or listen to another story, but that we simply can’t.

Still, finding counterstories is possible because there are many storylines both within and between individuals. Narrative mediators help disputants find counterstories by engaging in double listening, or listening for what is *not* being said. Monk and Winslade give this example of double listening: “The story that I am not happy about something that exists is one version of events. If we flip this story over, there is always something that I would prefer to what I am frustrated by” (Ch 3). Flipping the story, then, can have a tremendous impact on what seems unchangeable, especially in terms of emotion. For example, returning to my story, if my version of events is that the representative was out to ruin my writing center, which angered me, I could flip that anger to reveal my sense of rejection and loss of agency—and my hope to make the situation better.

Finding alternate storylines involves recognizing that stories have characters in them, and when real individuals become characters in our stories, we explain them as less dynamic than they really are as our story becomes more rigid and concise. We might even start to *essentialize* them, which is to say we begin to believe that they are, at essence, a certain way due to nature or inborn personality (Winslade and Monk 6). For example, if a writer comes into the writing center late and stays on her cell phone, the tutor might believe that the writer is a rude person. And, if the tutor thinks the writer is a rude person, that tutor will not, therefore, be able to imagine a plausible scenario in which the two of them could work productively together.

What we say also impacts how a person can respond to what we say. Winslade and Monk describe a process called position calling. Boiled down, position calling involves how our choice of what we say affects or even limits the discourse the other person can take up, what they can say. In a situation in which we want to be able to negotiate with someone with whom we are in conflict, we must pay attention to whether what we say leaves room for the other party to respond. Conflict strongly entrenches us in our stories and makes avoiding position calling more difficult because “people frequently resort to totalizing accusations directed at each other. Accusatory discourse accords room for only denial or capitulation. It leaves little room for negotiation” (Winslade and Monk 49). In our work, a director accusing an administrator of attempting to shut down the writing center leaves the administrator fewer options for responding and leaves both of them fewer counterstories to

uncover. If we want to keep the lines of communication open, we must be careful not to silence someone, or curb their options for responding, by our stance.

WHY I COULDN'T FIND COUNTERSTORIES

My initial story tells of my center and, by extension, my livelihood being threatened. It tells of me first realizing that I had not figured out the secret to effective communication with stakeholders across campus. I felt as if the administration intended to replace the writing center regardless of all the progress I thought I had made. Those feelings demotivated me and made it difficult to see any way in which the center and my relationships across campus could come out unscathed. I didn't know how to proceed.

But then I saw my story in the writing center grand narrative: "writing centers are comfortable, iconoclastic places where all students go to get one-to-one tutoring on their writing" (Grutsch McKinney 3). The writing center grand narrative made my story sticky for me. For one, in *my* story, writing centers are also places where *all* students go, and so I felt supported in thinking that all students at my institution should be going to the writing center. Second, in *my* story, my writing center was iconoclastic and non-traditional in its approach to education: we didn't just correct papers like the corporate-style tutoring system that was being brought in. We wanted to see results, but not of the speed or kind that the corporate-style tutoring system could produce. Because the writing center community tells some similar stories, my story contributed to a feeling of belonging to that community, just as Grutsch McKinney indicates it does. Because my story had some elements of the grand narrative, I did not have to work hard to get many others to support me when I told it, and their agreement further strengthened my story's power over me.

Paradoxically, when alternate storylines did emerge from writing center colleagues, I ruled out their applicability to my situation. After sharing my story with another director, he maintained that having the same corporate tutoring system actually worked in tandem with his center to increase usage; however, I saw his experience as an exception rather than a plausible, possible storyline for myself. Although getting someone else's perspective might help reveal a storyline, stories sometimes become "closed" for a variety of reasons, despite one's efforts to see beyond them (Cobb, "A Narrative Perspective" 54).

COUNTERSTORY AND ACTION

A counterstory had to emerge for me to act, and for it to emerge, I needed at least a new plotline and characters. An awareness

of how stories function in combination with double listening, an avoidance of essentializing, and a reconsideration of my acts of position calling helped me. Seeing what I was saying as a part of a story that is reinforced by another, more powerful story was a beginning. In my new story, I did not have to concentrate on numbers above all else. I realized I had taken comfort in the fact that we were nontraditional and, therefore, similar to other writing centers, but that this comfort did not work to move me forward. How to move onward past a story that was reinforced by a grand narrative and therefore sticky, though, was not clear yet. Then, using double listening—flipping my story of rejection and loss of agency—opened up another storyline centered on what I most wanted rather than on what I felt I had lost. And what I wanted, more than anything else, was the Writing Center to belong to everyone, not just me. Rather than blame the administrator and my friend for not seeing it the way I wanted them to, I would need to continue to work at just that: to continue to build the center and continue to reach out to stakeholders.

By paying attention to essentializing and position calling, too, I changed how I saw the characters involved, including myself. I tried very hard not to ascribe one way of being to a person, not to flatten in my mind their personhood into a character. I had to stop essentializing *myself* as impulsive and overly dogmatic to see even myself in a better light. I had to stop essentializing the administrator so as to see her as someone with whom I could negotiate. I could see that I had called the representative and administrator into defensive positions, limiting what they could say back. Even though I couldn't go back and change my accusatory language, with my administrator I could move forward knowing better for the next time. I had also called the representative into a defensive position, but that was something I had to stop worrying about.

Engaging in these actions allowed my new counterstory to emerge: I was a director who needed to place her focus on how we were helping students. My new goals were about trying to educate the tutors in better ways and about establishing better relationships with other stakeholders. Other characters in my story were trying to get me to see that they wanted more than we offered, and that I needed to build better and new relationships with them in order to work more effectively together—a realization that later made a collaboration with a move to the library (and away from other tutoring services) seem natural. I apologized to the administrator I had been so upset with, and I tried to make things right. Thus, my counterstory became an emergence of what is possible, what might happen next.

WHAT WE CAN DO

In order for us to effectively communicate with others on our campuses, especially those whose partnerships are essential, we need to be aware as much as possible of our own stories and the stories around us. We need to recognize simultaneously that we cannot always see our own story as a story, and that larger stories, like the writing center grand narrative, can entrench us, even if there is no outright conflict. We might ask ourselves, what about my story lines up with bigger cultural stories or grand narratives, such as those Grutsch McKinney has made visible? Am I essentializing another person or myself? How am I positioning the other person in my story and how are they reacting to that position? What possible stories of my own or of others might my story silence? And how might I listen to my own discourse to allow for these silenced stories? In asking these questions, we might reshape all of the stories by which we live and work.

NOTE

1. Sara Cobb, in *Speaking of Violence*, demonstrates the ways narrative perpetuates conflict and violence.



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