

Tutors' Column: "Mansplaining in the Writing Center: Gender Dynamics and the Ongoing Struggle with Authority"

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"No, no, no," the student said, "You just don't understand what I'm saying here."

I swallowed a frustrated sigh. Sitting up straighter in his chair, posturing as if he wanted to look down on me, he took the measure of explaining his topic in great detail. Instead of acknowledging any errors in his sentences, the student I was working with re-explained the topic of his paper. But I had trouble understanding his sentence due to grammatical and syntactical errors, while he took my confusion to mean that I did not understand the subject matter of his sentence. Every attempt at nondirectively asking him "what does this sentence mean?" or "what are you trying to say here?" was met with a digression on the topic of his whole paper—which was not what I was asking.

This guy, I thought, is just assuming that I don't know anything. He was rejecting my advice and assuming the position of educating me—even though I was the one he came to for help with his writing. Finally, I ended up (somewhat aggressively) telling him, "No, I understand all of the points you're trying to make. I know what you're trying to say. The problem is that your sentences are written in a way that makes them difficult to read, and your argument is getting lost in these grammar issues."

This type of consultation in which I had to assert expertise has happened countless times in my three years of tutoring, and I don't believe I'm alone. Power dynamics can be the root of many conflicts in writing center consultations—a topic central to the study of writing centers. For tutors, there is a subconscious tension in asserting proficiency and in the discomfort from the negotiated posture of authority each of us may assume. Students enter with an air of defensiveness and ownership about their work in a way that makes it challenging for tutors to perform their role. This topic is not new in writing center discourse, as the tension

surrounding power and authority has been discussed by Candace Spigelman and Stephen J. Corbett, among others. Peter Carino in 2003 identified that writing centers “have long been uncomfortable with power and authority,” yet at the same time, “writing centers can ill afford to pretend power and authority do not exist, given the important responsibility they have for helping students achieve their own authority as writers in a power-laden environment such as the university” (113, 126-7). Much of this discussion surrounding authority occurs within the directive/nondirective debate—a debate that, I would argue, carries more layers beyond the implications of pedagogical theory and application. One of these layers is gender.

At my writing center at The Ohio State University at Mansfield, most of the tutors are women. Since many writing centers have more female than male tutors, it is worth considering how the conversations around power and gender in the writing center can come together in order to contribute to both the specialized pedagogy of tutor training and the vexed negotiation of authority present within writing center discourse. Applying a feminist lens can help us to gauge the attitudes surrounding the writing center as a feminized space and provide insight for tutors on how gender impacts the dynamics of consultations.

To align these conversations about the writing center within the modern feminist discourse, let us consider the contemporary topic of “mansplaining.” A concept first discussed by Rebecca Solnit before it evolved into a trendy term, mansplaining refers to the condescending tendency of men to assume intellectual superiority in their interactions with women. In her popular 2008 LA Times article, “Men Who Explain Things,” Solnit articulates the paradigm of men who take this stance:

Men explain things to me, and to other women, whether or not they know what they’re talking about. . . . It’s the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare. . . . It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men’s unsupported overconfidence.

A prevalent presumption that women are “empty [vessels] to be filled with [men’s] wisdom and knowledge” certainly complicates any woman’s ascent into the professional world, as this only adds to the obstacles she may face (Solnit). But in an academic sphere—one of undeniable authority in an information-based society—women’s dominance turns this dynamic on its head because in the writing center, it is often women who are tasked with explaining things to students (including men).

So, how can tutors like us contend with the complications that arise in the writing center due to power and gender? Within our conversations on authority in the writing center, we must consider the different dynamics at play—whether it be race, age, or gender.¹ Resisting gendered conflicts is difficult, as such power imbalances permeate the institution, but addressing how these conflicts impact writing consultations, through ongoing conversation and cognizance of this issue, is the first step to considering the deeper layers of such conflicts. To remediate some of these conflicts, we, as tutors, should stay grounded in our role to perform the job required of us, and in doing so, we may be able to deflect some tutorial conflict. For even if we cannot individually solve such large structural issues, we can uphold our expertise in a way that reestablishes the purpose of the consultation. For example, in instances when male students may attempt to “mansplain” to female tutors in an attempt to leverage expertise, female tutors may benefit from a more directive approach by circling back to the agenda set at the beginning of the consultation. By gently reminding the student of the purpose of the consultation and confirming that both tutor and student understand each other throughout, the tutor may avoid a battle of who-knows-more-than-who by reverting the discussion back to the original plan. Another strategy for mitigating the conflict of mansplaining is for tutors to reiterate and paraphrase the writer’s argument back to them in order to communicate a mutual understanding about the subject matter and to ensure both tutor and student are on the same page going forward. This might have been a good strategy for me; in the case of the male student who seemingly assumed that I was incapable of understanding his topic, it would have been a better move to more clearly demonstrate both my knowledge on writing and my ability to understand his paper with a kind reminder of the purpose of his visit. While dealing with such conflicts is not easy, handling and solving the issues that arise from establishing expertise and that involve our identity-based differences demands a patience and open-mindedness that comes from keeping the central task at hand. Doing what we can to mitigate these conflicts requires continual consideration of how the perceived differences of tutor and student affect the negotiation of power in the writing center.

NOTE

1. Addressing large institutional concerns of gendered discrimination in the writing center and the university writ large is no easy task; scholars have tried to navigate this issue in terms of the “feminization” of the writing center. While Michelle Miley attempts to repackage this “feminized” label of the writing center with the language of empowerment with the concept of “feminist mothering,” our understanding of these power dynamics remains fixed in a gender binary. Thomas Spitzer-Hanks questions if “universities begin to see writing centers as useful tools

for retention and recruitment and manage to somehow fully imbricate them in neo-liberal ways of being and learning in the corporate university, have writing centers then been ‘masculinized?’”



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