

Tutors' Column: "The Language We Occupy"

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As a writing fellow for a developmental writing course, I have learned the importance of creating holistic bonds with each of my students. The importance of my relationships with them stems from a long, drawn out history of the silencing of their voices. My college, St. Olaf, is a unique space. Throughout campus are places, like the Writing Center, that excel in including marginalized students. However, there are far more places on campus that exclude many marginalized students.

I am lucky enough to work at the Writing Center, a place considered one of my campus' more progressive spaces. The benefit of working at the Writing Center is our access to the student body. I tutor in a developmental course titled Writing 110: Skills in Composition, where a majority of the students are people of color. Though this course is taught by faculty in the Writing Program, embedded Writing 110 Writing and Research tutors connect the course to both the library and the Writing Center. All writers have the option of going to the Research Desk or Writing Center on their own, but the embedded support of the Writing and Research tutors is tailored to this course.

Not only was I able to connect with these writers because we shared the same skin color, but I was also able to connect with them because most of us are from inner cities. The writers and I are single-handedly bonded from just that. Even the way we show up to the space is distinctly different from what surrounds us. Our Air Jordans and ripped jeans contrast the sweater vests and khakis that fill the space. Not only does our appearance disrupt the space, but we are different in other aspects. However, during our tutoring sessions the writers show up as their true selves, not as what is expected of them. They are able to remove the mask they wear in front of their white peers and just exist with someone like them. My writers and I understand one another, we speak the same language, we share the same struggle in formally transitioning to Standard Written English (SWE).

Upon entering college, we were told that the education we would receive would be life altering, forever reflecting the high rigor of our liberal arts institution. Our learning in the classroom—and many other places on campus including the Writing Center—was meant to be an outlet for us to grow as students, to flourish academically, and to thrive within the realms St. Olaf had given us. Writing in particular was offered as a space that would expose writers to possibilities they never thought they could obtain, but it had actually become a tool to use to properly mold St. Olaf students into a bubble. For my college, teaching marginalized students the “proper” way to write was another way to offer assimilation into a world they would never fully be accepted in regardless of mastery.

Let me make clear that St. Olaf College is not to blame for the creation of SWE; many faculty simply choose to continue to teach this outdated and limited standard. As a predominantly white institution, many spaces on my campus participate in perpetuating the harm SWE does to students of color. Though many of the professors do a superb job in teaching the basic skills of writing in Writing 110, while also affirming students’ voices outside SWE, many of the students still struggle with writing after leaving the class. Many professors want to help their students succeed in learning SWE but don’t recognize what that costs students in their freedom as writers. Many students never find their place in the writing realm because they struggle finding the balance between their voice and their writing.

This is why it is so important to uplift my writers’ voices as they undergo their transition of learning a new standard. This is also where the essentialness of my bond with my writers is most evident. Who am I to tell them that the way they write is not good enough to be considered academic? Who benefits most by changing a student’s writing? Most students easily—and without question—adjusted to SWE. For years, having access to a proper education had trained them to never question the agenda behind the skills they were learning. White students, especially, had the privilege of moving in academic spaces that were tailored to their learning. Inner-city students of color could not afford the same luxury.

I know it’s important for writers to always feel validated as they learn the norms of operating SWE. But, I also know the rejection someone would feel after hearing their writing isn’t adequate for submission. As an English major, I have feared whether my writing would sound the way I spoke. I’ve been conditioned by educators to believe slang is not acceptable in SWE, and my biggest regret is that I’ve never questioned the conditioning. I see why SWE is widely accepted and used; it perpetuates a formality that anyone who speaks/writes English should write using the guidelines provided by SWE. Anything else is deemed unacceptable. Even so, teaching SWE often makes me feel uneasy. My uneasiness comes from recognizing how my institution functions: the reality is I

know I take up too much space with my Black skin, meaning the language I occupy has to be the same as the students around me to be perceived as unthreatening. This is why there is such a push for students to transition to SWE as they enter college. Students like myself and students like my writers cannot afford to be any different than our counterparts because our skin is different enough.

I know that I want to connect with my writers on a personal level. I find that by connecting with them through language I can understand how they want to learn. The work we're doing at the Writing Center is identity work. It's more than teaching how to write; it is about teaching them to experience and express their identity on a campus that was never meant for them. Every marginalized student must learn what it is to be deemed worthy of an academic career in an institution that was never created for them. Given the tools to speak, write, and advocate for themselves, they will create spaces that they feel most welcome in. This identity work applies to research, too. I am cross-trained as not only a Writing Tutor but also a Research Tutor, meaning I face similar challenges of assimilating students into existing systems with racist histories when teaching them to find and evaluate sources. At the same time, I work to challenge these norms as well, asking students to find research that reflects their experience and researchers who reflect their identity. It's both inviting them into a space not built for them and inviting them to create their own space.

The harsh reality we have to face is that those of us who recognize the power dynamics of language recognize that naming the power is important to confronting and changing the dynamic for the betterment of future writers. Together we can recognize the power that SWE has in their academic careers while also combating the limiting standards it has placed upon their writing.

I think about the spaces my writers occupy whenever they write. I think about what makes their voices special, how not to water down their version of the truth, and how to give them the space to properly flourish. I think about how they are perceived in the spaces they disrupt. I think about why they matter and why their voices and experiences matter. I believe this is what is most important in academia, not only for the students but for the institution as well.

As a tutor, my journey with language will continue, and by checking the privilege I have in understanding SWE, I can continue to educate my writers. The systems that perplex me will not hinder my growth; instead I will investigate the depths in which they affect my everyday life. My hope is for writers to continue to challenge the spaces around them because they may break the walls that hinder them. As I know, writing is the most integral part of a student's academic career, but that does not mean students should not be allowed to challenge a system they do not fit within.