

Good to Know? Confidentiality and Privacy in Writing Centers and Libraries

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After an appointment with an aspiring memoirist, our tutor Ann (pseudonym) announced to another tutor: “The writer is so talented, not even writing for a class, and homeless!” Ann clearly admired the writer’s talent in the face of adversity. Yet, as Molly, the Center’s assistant director, overheard Ann’s exclamation, she thought, *Oh no. We can’t disclose writers’ living situations. That’s private!* Tutors routinely reveal information about writers’ courses, assignments, and demeanor as we debrief sessions. So, at this moment, Molly said nothing, but later she talked with Elizabeth, information literacy librarian and Center co-administrator, wondering, “We can’t casually share a writer’s personal information, right?” Elizabeth smiled knowingly: privacy and confidentiality weren’t nascent constructs to her. Librarians have thought a lot about patron information—drawing lines through personal information in thick, black ink.

Our Center for Research & Writing, administered by Kate, Elizabeth, and Molly, provides both research and writing support to students. Our data is stored within a library-based data management system and is used in annual library reports. This includes our records of writing tutoring sessions and the personal information that we gather when working with students. Our integration of a research fellows program and a writing center began in 2017, and since then, we’ve been examining the prevailing discourses and practices in writing center and library scholarship and grappling with *how* to integrate our work despite important differences. One way we’ve tackled these challenges is by developing a heuristic, shared below, that pushes us to take an interdisciplinary approach to quandaries like the one that opens this piece.

In this article, we consider differences we’ve encountered regarding

privacy and confidentiality, when our library side cautions us against collecting or sharing students' personal information and our writing center side encourages us to learn more about the students we work with. Integration has helped us view privacy and confidentiality as everyday issues in our center. When our tutors open sessions asking, "What course is this for?" for example, Elizabeth cringes. What if the student isn't writing or researching for a course? Will the student feel surveilled or discouraged from seeking specific kinds of information? Asking about a *course* is intrusive from a librarian's perspective: what about other ways data is managed in writing centers, like collecting students' names, contact information, majors, or graduation years? While the homelessness revelation is a more extreme example, tutors regularly learn about intimate details of writers' lives. By contrast, librarians provide services without asking for any personal information, not even the patron's name.

Privacy and confidentiality have been central issues for libraries since at least 1939, when the American Library Association (ALA) published the "Library Bill of Rights." The ALA defines privacy as "the right to open inquiry without having the subject of one's interest [...] scrutinized by others," and explains that confidentiality "exists when a library is in possession [...] of information about its users and keeps that information private on their behalf," including "library-created records [such] as [...] circulation records, Web sites visited, reserve notices, or research notes" (American Library Association).

The ALA Council's statement explains the need to closely guard patrons' information: "Consider patrons looking for a new job or information about rock climbing or skydiving; this is information that the current employer or insurance company would like to have." Open records might also lead to unfounded and "sinister" assumptions about patrons: Will those who borrow murder mysteries be suspected of murderous intent? Will those seeking information about terrorism be suspected of plotting an attack? The ALA argues that without adequate safeguards for information, patrons' records could be weaponized, compromising our intellectual freedom and even our democracy.

In writing center literature, confidentiality and privacy are discussed in response to concerns about censorship and first amendment rights (Sherwood), the dilemmas around collecting and sharing data, especially with instructors (Pemberton; Lerner; Conway), and, less directly, in texts foregrounding the role of identity in the center (Denny; Villanueva). Yet, when scholars envision writing center work as activism in the name of social justice, identifying factors

essential to this work seem at odds with library-based definitions of confidentiality and privacy. Libraries' attempts to protect individuals' intellectual freedom and writing centers' intentions to support individuals and groups signal differing approaches to larger activist agendas.

Many writing center practitioners have embraced the idea that *deanonymizing*, or "facing" the center (Denny), and building authentic relationships among center users and staff, is ethical and pedagogically sound (Greenfield and Rowan; Bruce and Rafoth). In his recent article, Mark Latta articulates this philosophy, writing that the "main objective" of peer tutoring is "relational and collaborative. We [tutors] attempt to discover writers' various cultural, family, and community forms of knowledge [...] so we may connect these funds to the task at hand [...] and help to develop the writer's critical consciousness." While embraced by many writing centers, Latta's conviction about the importance of information gathering isn't shared by our library colleagues. Our Center's integration prompted us to rethink the ethics of "discovering" (Latta's term) and recording students' personal information, defined here as any information about a writer—from demographics to details of experience—which, when shared in conversation or stored (in post-session notes, for example), remain "attached" to the writer.

In *Ethics and the Reference Librarian*, Charles A. Bunge highlights *confidentiality* as one of the librarian's core ethical responsibilities in one-to-one interactions with patrons, but also as a site of difficulty: "Most dilemmas in this area of ethics involve the possibility of inadvertently revealing information that should be confidential and deciding when revealing confidential information might be permissible because it is in the client's best interest or in the best interest of society at large" (51). Bunge underscores the field's serious treatment of privacy issues while acknowledging that principles such as not discussing patrons with others are easier stated than enacted. Bunge's attention to how patron information is shared, even between colleagues, and ethical tensions embedded within one-to-one interactions, highlights a gap in writing center discussions, which have yet to articulate a cohesive philosophy regarding writers' personal information.

To help writing center staff develop approaches for managing personal information discovered during tutoring interactions, we offer guidance through a heuristic primarily informed by well-established library and information science (LIS) conversations. To develop this heuristic, we combined concepts from two existing LIS heuristics that address institutional and individual priorities when dealing with issues of privacy and confidentiality. The first

LIS heuristic, proposed initially by Richard Rubin and Thomas Froehlich, is a set of questions foregrounding institutional (or an organization's) best interests in questions of privacy and confidentiality. For example, they ask: "To what extent is the survival of the organization threatened?" and "To what extent will the purpose of the organization be harmed?" (Rubin 548). The organizational/institutional focus in these questions invites us to extend our focus beyond the one-to-one, to imagine the implications of decisions on the larger contexts of our practice. Librarians, for example, routinely consider the consequences of decisions in terms of the ideals of democracy and freedom. The second heuristic, also developed by Rubin, identifies "factors" influencing ethical deliberation in libraries: social utility, survival, social responsibility, and respect for the individual. Social utility and responsibility seem combinable, calling practitioners to consider the social goods affected through the library's work (e.g, defending democracy, educating students). Survival, the second factor, seems tied to institutional welfare. Rubin's final factor, respect for the individual, names the value that writing centers attend to most instinctively.

Respect for the individual begins with the idea that "People have a right to act as they choose, insofar as they do not violate the dignity and respect of others" (Rubin 548). Librarians respect individuals by building representative collections, offering access to technologies, and limiting access to patrons' information. Writing centers prioritize the individual—from our concerns about ownership, to our emphasis on writer agency and discussions of linguistic and racial hegemony. But writing centers may also demonstrate respect in ways that could, by LIS standards, compromise privacy, as we "face" personal information like identifications and experience, sometimes collecting and even recording this information.

In our heuristic, we distinguish between information that is solicited (requested), shared (between people outside the tutorial), and stored (in record management systems). In considering shared and stored information, we acknowledge the challenge of deciding *who* should have access to a writer's personal information outside the tutorial: should tutors share information exclusively with center administrators? Other tutors? Within systems accessible to instructors or administrators? Our customized heuristic offers a guide to structure deliberation when issues of privacy and confidentiality arise in the writing center. It builds on Rubin's influencing factors (reimagined as "values" on the left) and Rubin and Froehlich's question-based heuristic (reflected in the questions on the right-hand side of the chart).

VALUE	RELATED QUESTIONS / DEFINITION
Respect for individual (writer) <i>Prioritizing individual wellbeing, safety, agency, and sense of belonging</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How might the writer benefit from (or be harmed by) requests for personal information? ● How could the writer benefit from (or be harmed by) the storage/sharing of personal information outside the tutorial?
Respect for individual (tutor) <i>Prioritizing individual wellbeing, safety, agency, and sense of belonging</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How might the tutor benefit from (or be harmed by) asking the writer for personal information? ● How might the tutor benefit from (or be harmed by) sharing a writer's personal information with someone outside the tutorial?
Socially-constructed learning <i>Prioritizing the interpersonal relationship and its potential to drive learning (including critical thinking and inquiry, risk-taking, rhetorical awareness)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How might soliciting a writer's personal information advance (or undermine) learning goals? ● How might sharing personal information outside the tutoring interaction advance (or undermine) learning goals (for tutor or writer)?
Social responsibility <i>Prioritizing broader goods (including social justice aims, democratic values, intellectual freedom, larger educational missions and priorities)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How might soliciting, sharing, or storing a writer's personal information benefit (or harm) the wider institution, community, or world?
Institutional welfare and advancement <i>Prioritizing the survival and mission of the writing center and/or the institution itself</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How might soliciting a writer's personal information serve (or undermine) institutional priorities? ● How might sharing and/or storing personal information serve (or undermine) institutional priorities? ● How might not soliciting, sharing, or storing personal information serve (or undermine) institutional priorities?

This heuristic can be introduced during training to help tutors develop habits of mind for encounters with writers' personal information. These encounters abound in our center—writers share personal experiences in conversation or writing, faculty request session reports, we write post-session notes and make decisions about data management systems (like WCOOnline). Undoubtedly, readers can recollect ethically-charged experiences with personal information in their centers. When these scenarios

arise, we talk them through before turning to the heuristic. Then, we use the heuristic to help us expand our view beyond our disciplinary-inspired reflexive responses to ethical challenges. The scenario that opened this piece, wherein a writer shared their living situation with our tutor, is a useful test case for our heuristic. Because the writer's disclosure was unsolicited, the most pressing ethical questions raised by this scenario involve how we, as a staff, share or store the disclosed information. The heuristic prompts us to consider who (beyond Ann and the writer) should have access to the information? How should it be shared or stored if at all? And, importantly, what are the consequences to the writer, tutor, center, or our larger community or institution, of our approach to the information? Although Ann has since graduated, sharing the writer's information with the administrative team might have helped her grow as a tutor. Together, we could have reflected on how the writer's revelation affected her choices in the session or her view of the writer. We might have discussed how sympathy for or even exoticization of the writer affects practice and asked whether a writer's personal details are relevant to how we support them.

We can also imagine discussing the storage of the writers' information in post-session notes. At the time of Ann's session, our tutors wrote post-session notes to summarize and reflect on their work with each writer. These notes were stored in WOnline and accessible to our full staff. While writing post-session notes that included the writer's personal information might have been useful for Ann's development as a tutor, the heuristic challenges us to think about how the writer, our Center, the institution (etc.) stands to benefit from such storage or sharing. If the writer learned that other tutors knew their personal information, would they feel their privacy had been violated? Would sharing or storing the writer's personal information have the sort of chilling effect that librarians fear on the writer's intellectual pursuits? What if the writer's personal information became known outside the center? What consequences might the writer face, personally, socially, or academically?

Beyond questions of writer and tutor, we've considered how this scenario is implicated in the center's welfare and advancement. Our Center *has* gained from the tutor's casual disclosure to her colleagues, which opened conversations about privacy and confidentiality, presented a welcome training challenge, and helped Kate, Elizabeth, and Molly develop as ethical practitioners. However, we wonder how casual disclosures may undermine a center's reputation or standing on campus. After careful consideration of

all the values within the heuristic, there's a decision to make. Lane Wilkinson proposes that librarians might move from deliberation to ethical action by “determin[ing] the action that maximizes each principle” (7). Rather than weighting the values or principles in our heuristic and prioritizing one over another, we should choose courses of action (say, sharing information with the full staff or revising the types of information we collect/store) that realize all five values to the greatest extent possible.

We ultimately determined that there was ethical justification for limited sharing of the writer's personal information, beyond Ann's tutorial. Specifically, it would be acceptable for Ann to tell the administrative team what she learned about the writer because that act would open opportunities for learning in our Center. That said, we recognize, with some discomfort, that authorizing any sharing of this writer's personal details beyond the tutorial prioritizes the “good” of the center over the “good” of the writer. And, given the chance, we would discourage Ann from including the writer's personal information in her session notes or discussing it with colleagues. We'd also caution that our conclusion is *not* a generalizable ethical principle—such principles aren't the goal of this heuristic. Instead, we've found that developing and using the rubric with our staff has heightened our awareness of the issues around privacy and confidentiality, helping us to think and act more deliberately when it comes to personal information in our Center. In other words, Molly and Kate learned to think a bit more like librarians.

To wit: recently, our institution encouraged our Center to adopt a university-wide data management system, but all three of us balked at the system's data storing and sharing capabilities. Using that system would mean opening our records, and those of our writers, to examination by individuals outside our Center (including faculty, administrators, and staff at our institution). Although the system would have been free (a difficult advantage to ignore), we opted to purchase a subscription to an external system to retain control of our records and data. Decisions regarding privacy and confidentiality aren't comfortable or easy, but they are unavoidable. Tutors will occasionally find themselves entrusted with intimate details of writers' lives. When it happens, we must be ready to account for the distinctness of the writer, tutor, center, institution, and world in our ethical deliberations. Our discomfort in these deliberations is a fair price for the privilege of knowing and learning with others.



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