

Welcomeness and Identity in Campus Partnerships

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Welcomeness is a dynamic act and an explicit shared value for writing centers and libraries. For decades writing center scholarship largely espoused a grand narrative of writing centers as “cozy homes” replete with comfy couches and coffee, the overly simplistic narrative Jackie Grutsch McKinney interrogates in *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers* (25). While no single, unifying metaphor is used in library research, related descriptions of academic library spaces include public forums, “third places” on campus (Elteto et al. 334; Whitmire 60), and repositories of knowledge. A common theme in these descriptions is the idea of neutrality; by adopting a neutral stance, libraries make themselves equally welcoming to all patrons.

Writing center studies and library studies have begun questioning the implications of storying our work in this way, for within our spaces, dynamics of power and privilege exist. In these “neutral homes,” which are deeply coded as white/heteronormative/able-bodied, there are tensions, conflicts, misunderstandings, and differing viewpoints in moments of “meaningful discomfort” that provide us with opportunities to “participate more fully in the (re)negotiation of meaning” (Geller et al. 19, 22). Recent writing center scholarship, such as the 2019 special issue of *The Peer Review* on *(Re)defining Welcome*, has interrogated constructs of hospitality, recognizing the gross privilege inherent in a “focusing on the writing” approach to our work that diminishes our identities and downplays the political nature of the spaces within which we work together. Co-editors Elise Dixon and Rachel Robinson write, “Does welcome equate a certain level of comfort and/or safety? Should it?”

As we research and dialogue about identity, welcomeness, writing centers, and libraries, we return continually to

the role of discomfort. Though in some ways writing centers and libraries are “kindred spirits,” our very collaboration entails acts of hospitality that necessarily involve discomfort as we—“we” being administrators, our employees, and our clients—negotiate shared values, spaces, and programming. Our insights come from four individuals: Constance and Teresa, graduate coordinators and doctoral students; Emilia, a teaching and learning librarian; and Grace, a writing center administrator. Each of us has a different vantage point on the collaboration between the Library and the Writing Center at Michigan State University (MSU), a Research I and land-grant institution. We are particularly interested in how reciprocal library and writing center partnerships and collaborative training can help us negotiate embodiment and identity as we enact welcomeness in our shared spaces.

BODIES SHARING SPACES

Constance, the Writing Center’s former library coordinator, shared an occurrence that transpired when a white female Writing Center receptionist asked a Black male student to move from a table in the library space that was reserved for writing center consultations. This encounter occurred later in the semester, and at this time, MSU’s library is usually packed. The Writing Center receptionist had already told numerous students to relocate that day and was becoming annoyed with those who seemed to disregard the reserved Writing Center spaces.

Walking over to a table where a young Black man had decided to sit, the receptionist firmly asked him to move, stating that her request was not personal but a requirement of policy. With the messaging coming off as abrasive, the student ended up responding defensively, asking the receptionist why he needed to move if the table was not being occupied. Seeing his point as valid, Constance, observing that over half of the Writing Center tables were empty, intervened by speaking with the student and making the decision to let him stay.

This story highlights a central tension in writing center and library collaborations that emerges from our simply sharing physical spaces, which is a common situation for these two units. Libraries operate as a site of intersection, and within universities, students across ages, disciplines, and cultures congregate within the library, where the default stance has historically been and can still be whiteness and privilege or maintaining the comfort of some at the expense of others.

In the MSU Library’s main space, Writing Center consultants are guests within the library in the sense that we borrow space or are

stewards of a specific space during specific times. This space we borrow also has an open design, compounding uncertainty for consultants and clients about the boundaries between the library and the Writing Center. While we do place signs during our open hours on each table and in front of the elevator adjacent to the space, these signs are not permanent, and during crowded hours within the library, they are easily and understandably overlooked. This then leads to a dilemma: how do we establish what space is ours without alienating students from either the Writing Center or the library? In cases like the one presented in our story, consultants make in-the-moment decisions and must balance the idea of hospitality for the writing center against general hospitality for library student users.

But in weighing these decisions, our bodies and intersectional identities are, of course, present and integral. By intersectionality, a concept developed by theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (in 1989) specifically in reference to the complex social realities and discriminations of Black women, we refer to the multiple overlapping identities we carry as well as how those identities relate to and are impacted by power and privilege. The library exists as a particular site to discuss intersectionality considering how it brings together people with different identities and ways of being and experiencing the world. While the particular student from this story may have felt defensive for several reasons, students of color who already feel marginalized within a predominantly white institution (PWI) might understandably express frustration and irritation when being asked to physically relocate. We know from the library literature that Black students in particular feel less welcome in academic library spaces than their white peers (Elteto et al. 326). Black students also feel like they are subject to microaggressions and surveillance, particularly by white students (Stewart et al. 28), including displays of visible surprise at seeing Black people studying (Brook et al. 262) or critiques of how they and other people of color are using the library space (263). There is also potentially a connection between perceived racism on campus and feelings of welcomeness in the library (Stewart et al. 27). Against this backdrop, we begin to understand that what might seem like a passing interaction between a writing center employee and a student might be part of a larger or systemic pattern, resulting in the student feeling unwelcome and unfairly scrutinized.

When Constance and Grace met next, Constance shared that this occurrence had transpired. Together, they spoke about how to provide consultants working in the library with guidance on embodiment, intersectionality, and space. With this in mind,

Constance met with the center's library receptionists and facilitated a conversation on thinking more critically about how we present ourselves (our voices, bodies, stances, etc.) when interacting with each other both within and between the Writing Center and library spaces. Pulling from Black feminist social theories (e.g. Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, etc.), Constance initiated the conversation by discussing how individuals' overlapping identities shape their experiences and perceptions of others in drastically different ways. While discussing the benefits of critical self-reflection, Constance and the receptionists used their time together to consider casually the power dynamics created by variances in race, gender, class, sexuality, and other identity factors. Encouraging receptionists to reflect on and think about their positive and negative experiences in writing center spaces, as well as the contexts, emotions, and bodies present in/around those situations, helped receptionists spend time locating the ways in which their experiences are "always and already" multidimensional. Though this conversation proved to be difficult, as most of the receptionists' more uncomfortable moments included men and male-presenting clients, leading the conversation to focus heavily on power inequities created by and through gender, receptionists were still able to identify how differences in identity create varied meaning(s) for people. During the Writing Center's next orientation, an internal task force led a similar conversation for consultants on navigating sessions when they might feel uncomfortable, de-escalation tactics, and ways of signaling for support from their colleagues.

IDENTITY AND INTERVENTIONS

In addition to MSU Library's main library space, writing consultants and the library's peer research assistants (PRAs) have collaborated across many smaller spaces in the university's neighborhoods since 2013.¹ From the beginning, although both groups of student employees were aware of each other and their different services, we found that offering these cursory explanations and simply sharing physical proximity did not automatically lead to collaboration between PRAs and writing consultants. Furthermore, since writing and research are inextricable processes, PRAs and consultants shared moments of discomfort as they navigated student frustration at choosing the "wrong service" at the wrong time. At the same time, the physical proximity of the services allows both PRAs and consultants to refer students to each other, and this has even created instances when the two student employees work together with a student.

While on one hand we realize that all spaces will never be welcoming

for all people, we do believe that considering nuanced questions of intersectionality and embodiment during training aids us in thinking more critically and inclusively about welcomeness. Currently, the Writing Center welcomes the PRAs into its space during consultant orientation and facilitates a discussion about how writing and research help differs, intersects, and overlaps. The discussion is built on scenarios where both consultants and PRAs could have a role and during which they consider the interplay of “the dynamics of identity” in each session (Denny 96). The scenarios were originally drafted by writing center graduate coordinators and then modified by Emilia.² In one scenario, for example, a white female student pursuing a doctorate in education comes to the Writing Center with a dissertation on the “literacy practices of African American high school students in Detroit.” PRAs and consultants address various aspects of the session and consider how the student’s identity and their own identities would factor into the session as well as dynamics of power and privilege.

Here the connection between language and identity and the Writing Center’s Language Statement informs conversations. The Language Statement specifically addresses the concept of Standard Written English, stating that “We challenge the notion of Standard English as the only correct expressive form; rather, we recognize and value a number of Englishes.”³ Similarly, the PRA program is informed by library literature that urges programs to be aware of how language can assist or put up barriers to students’ successful use of the library. Students may “code-switch” for different information tasks (Albarillo 641), so Emilia coaches PRAs to recognize that patrons might not use “standard” library terminology to describe their needs (Fauchelle 613). They may also be more willing to discuss their information needs with someone who understands their language or culture (Danquah & Wu 69) or feel less anxiety about communicating in a familiar language (Koenigstein 79). While PRAs do not reflect the full range of language diversity at MSU, Emilia does encourage PRAs to speak to students using their preferred language and mode, when possible, and tries to hire PRAs from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. This emphasis on language diversity emerges as a particular point of connection in the literature from library scholarship and writing center studies as well as a unifying value between our units.⁴

One example from the co-training session is a scenario about an international student who wants to make his grammar sound “like a native English speaker.” In discussing this scenario, PRAs and consultants surfaced themes like unspoken expectations for college writing, differing cultural norms, and language privilege that would

help them welcome and bring this student to the table, rather than pass judgement about “bad” writing and citation practices. Having both PRAs and consultants present to discuss this scenario helped participants articulate how their personal and professional identities might affect their approach to assisting the student, and they began to see how these different approaches could work collaboratively to welcome similar students.

Another scenario from the co-training session invoked PRAs and consultants to discuss how they might go about working with students whose writings were blatantly racist and/or offensive towards Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). This scenario was extended to ask PRAs and consultants how they might intervene if that same person was working with a BIPOC tutor. While some people came to the conclusion that the student should be reassigned to a tutor who would not be subjected to their harm, others noted that due to their own values, identities, and embodied experiences, they would have to either walk away from the student or completely refuse their services. How do we take into consideration that there are people whose values push directly against ideas of welcomeness and put the students and people in our spaces who have marginalized identities at risk? Do we find ways to extend welcomeness to those people or do we rethink our commitments to them? How exactly do we begin to navigate the writing center not only as a place of welcomeness, but also as a place where some bodies and identities do not, and will not, ever align?

THE PRESENT MOMENT AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Inspired by conversations with consultants about their experiences in the library, we’re developing shared training for Writing Center and library employees, including students, faculty, and staff, on working across identities and differences, particularly considering the dynamics of power and privilege. This has become a new point of further collaboration for library and Writing Center administrators, and we hope to conduct this conversation with staff from both units to discuss first our own intersectionality identities and then how we work with others considering their different identities within the context of a PWI.

We all bring multiple complex ways of being, knowing, and working in community to the table, and though literature from both fields has questioned the neutrality of our spaces and has engaged in social justice research and work, we know there is more to do. Considering the present moment, the “twin pandemics” of COVID-19 and racism (Crenshaw), the need to move beyond “neutrality,” beyond the “cozy white home,” becomes clear, and

we have “an ethical responsibility to intervene purposefully” (Greenfield 6). While we do not propose to offer simple solutions to complex, systemic problems, we have learned the importance of—as well as the vulnerabilities and discomforts in—collaboration, and in working together, we continue developing more critical understandings of intersectionality and embodied experiences as we welcome each other within the spaces we share.

We have not arrived. But as we look forward and consider our library-writing center collaboration, we center Robin DiAngelo’s call to “interrupt privilege-protecting comfort” (143), opening ourselves to engaging in conversations about intersectionality, embodiment, and welcoming sustainable and reciprocal partnerships that hold us accountable.

NOTES

1. Based on the planning concept of the “urban village,” the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative (NSSC) began in 2010 and divides campus into five neighborhoods. Engagement Centers within each neighborhood provide resources for students ranging from advising and health/wellness programming to research and writing support. One explicit goal of the neighborhoods is to close opportunity gaps between white students and racially minoritized students.

2. The scenarios are adapted annually and are available at <https://writing.msu.edu/training-resources/>.

3. The Language Statement for MSU’s Writing Center is on our website at writing.msu.edu/language-statement.

4. We acknowledge the work of language diversity advocates including Geneva Smitherman, Vershawn Ashanti Young, and Staci Perryman-Clark.



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