DOI: 10.37514/WLN-J.2023.47.3.04

WLN

Taking Up Space and Time: How Writing Center Administrators Can Better Support Fat (and All) Tutors

Paula Rawlins
Yale University

Amanda Arp
Central Methodist University

PAULA RAWLINS

AMANDA ARP

The writing center community has long questioned the notion that we offer a welcoming space for all students (Grutsch McKinney; McNamee and Miley). Recently, this conversation has expanded to include not just clients but also tutors (Denny et al; Lockett). Despite this trend, fat clients and tutors occupy one of several identity groups yet to be closely examined within the context of writing centers. The field of fat studies was firmly established by 2004 (Wann xi), but a search of the MLA database for "'fat' and 'writing center'" produces only one result: Erec Smith's 2013 *Praxis* article "Making Room for Fat Studies." Smith provides an introduction to the fat acceptance movement, but few scholars have taken up Smith's call to create a nuanced "understanding of what it means to be a fat writer or tutor" (2-3). A 2020 special issue of *Peer Review* on dress codes in writing centers features two articles that employ a fat studies framework to critique the oppressive nature of dress codes (Hansen and Carrobis; Pender). These articles focus more on the physicality of occupying a fat body in a writing center, whereas our piece offers an answer to Smith's call that focuses on the rhetorical situation that arises when fat tutors encounter fatphobic content in a student's paper.

Both authors of this piece identify as fat writing center practitioners, and we have each encountered anti-fat rhetoric during tutoring sessions. In these moments, our bodies were antithetical to the content before us. Below, we tell our most memorable stories of how we navigated such sessions. Through sharing these experiences, we aim to incorporate fat studies more deeply within writing center scholarship. We also offer a few suggestions for administrators, demonstrating how visions for welcoming, inclusive centers can dedicate space and time to fat bodies.

PAULA'S STORY

In 2017, I conducted a session that left me feeling confused and embarrassed. I had been working in writing centers for over a decade, collaborating with hundreds of clients successfully. These experiences, I thought, meant no paper's content could shock me. I was wrong.

The appointment began like any other. After some small talk, the client described her assignment and then shared a draft of her persuasive essay on the benefits of the keto diet. As the writer walked me through her essay, I noticed myself taking a deep breath. Working as a writing tutor, I had encountered many arguments with which I disagreed, so such a moment was not uncommon. However, the topic of dieting evoked strong feelings of skepticism in me, and I cautioned myself to avoid imposing my views on the student. At the time, I was not familiar with the term "diet culture" or the fact that little scientific evidence suggests weight loss can be successfully maintained longer than 18 months (Gaesser 39). I *did* know from a lifetime of experience that restrictive diets, at least for me, were more likely to lead to weight gain than weight loss. But I had never professed this idea aloud and to do so still felt both revolutionary and scary. After all, why would anyone take a fat person's critique of dieting seriously?

Glancing over the writer's work, I felt my heartbeat quicken. She was sitting to my left, so close I thought she might feel my body tensing up. To convince her reader to engage in this version of food restriction, the writer relied on a pathos-laden description of fat Americans, who, according to the draft, were not just unhealthy but "gross." I felt something akin to a punch in the gut when I read a sentence explicitly suggesting fat people should be ashamed of themselves. As a woman weighing over three hundred pounds, I did feel shame but also sadness and anger. I stared down at the page, frozen.

The physiological fight-or-flight symptoms I experienced—the tense muscles, accelerated heartbeat, and tunnel vision—were the same as when I had been overtly bullied in the past. When a voice from a passing SUV called out, "Go on a diet!," I could retreat to my car and cry cathartic tears. When an endocrinologist saw I had only shed five pounds since my last visit and told me he could not help me if I was not willing to help myself, I could choose to never return to his practice. This situation was different. I was sitting at my job, feeling trapped and hurt.

I stalled for time, wondering how to proceed. Finally, I chose my words carefully: "In this section here, where you use words like 'dis-

gusting' or 'gross,'" I pointed to the passage of concern and waited for the writer's cheeks to blush or for her to utter an apology. In the moments that followed, neither of these things happened, and I grew increasingly hurt and angry.

For the rest of the session, I did what I was trained not to do—what, today, I encourage the tutors I train to avoid: pointing out lower-order concerns instead of inviting a discussion about the content of the paper. Afterwards, I was both ashamed of the writing advice I had given (or failed to give) and freshly conscious of my "disgusting" body.

Afterwards, I explained what happened to my colleagues. While they were kind, I still felt unsettled and hurt long after my shift ended. It was not until years later, when I discussed this session with Amanda, that I came to understand my behavior as a reaction to trauma. The student's essay had summoned emotions associated with a lifetime of personal and societal body-shaming. Focusing on the paper's local concerns was an act of self-defense. It did not feel safe to talk about the paper's content, and so I took on the role of grammar expert, which allowed me to feel some sense of control and power again. I can forgive myself for having a bad session, but I cannot help but ask how I might have been better prepared to face the situation. Now, as an administrator, this question especially troubles me.

AMANDA'S STORY

In 2019, I experienced a session where, much like Paula, I felt discomfort and uncertainty as a tutor. That day was like any other at the center. I greeted the student, and we made small talk as we took our seats.

I began by inquiring about her assignment. She described how her group needed to choose a health issue and create a plan for intervention. The "issue" the team chose to address was a high "obesity" rate.[1] As I heard this description, tenseness spread throughout my chest. I was physically preparing for an appointment that would be topically challenging for me as a tutor with a fat body.

As we devised goals for improvement and went over areas in detail, it became apparent that, throughout this paper, fatness was being described as a problem to be solved. The student spoke with confidence as we discussed how to enhance the paper. I maintained the professional facade of a tutor as I had been trained, yet, as a fat person, I was hearing words and ideas that pushed back against my very existence. Unbeknownst to the student, a silent tension built within me. Behind the calm of my professional exterior, my mind

was racing. I became aware of my fleshy rolls against the desk—the flesh below my chin—the width of myself beside her. Did she think that I, too, was a problem to be solved?

Then, I had a different turn of thought—the student's proposal went against what I had learned from fat studies scholarship, which underscores how fatness is a natural part of human diversity, not a problem in need of intervention (Wann ix). This group's framing of fatness ignored the array of classist, racist, and gender-biased influences that fuel Western society's need to eliminate the fat body. Running parallel to our continued conversation about the paper, these thoughts circled in my mind, and I wondered—what was the right course of action when, as a fat person and fat studies scholar, I was saddened and hurt by this student's argument, but, as a tutor, I had the professional responsibility to help this student as best I could?

At a loss for how to straddle the line between writing center professionalism and personal desire to intervene, I gave the student a spot to work on as I excused myself. I made my way around the corner to speak with one of the center's assistant directors, Kelly Wenig.[2] I described the situation to him, summarizing how the paper presented fatness as inherently bad. We briefly discussed how the student and her team were likely viewing the situation as a medical problem "afflicting" people who could be "saved" without considering other connected social and societal aspects. Our conversation turned to what I could do; rather than presenting information directly, the technique of asking questions arose. He liked the idea and cautioned me that I should ask those questions in a professional and respectful way. I nodded and took a deep breath, readying myself to return to the session equipped with this new strategy. I now had a way to stay true to my positionality as a fat studies scholar and fat person and thereby provide a challenge to the group's perspective, while not betraying the purposes of my role as a tutor.

I reentered the room and asked the writer how her revisions were going. We had a short conversation about some of her changes, during which I mentally prepared what I wanted to say. I mapped out the phrasing, the tone, and the way I could transition from the topic we were on to my intervening thought. After a few minutes, I posed my questions, saying something along the lines of, "Are you aware of other ideas about 'obesity,' say from body-positive speakers? How do you think those ideas might impact your team's study?" She paused and admitted she was not sure.

After this session, I wondered, was my small act of questioning the right move? To what extent should the person I am impact how I interact with a student? Where was the balance between my professionalism as a writing tutor, my professional conduct as a developing graduate student and scholar, and my identity as a fat person?

Not long after this session, I met with a group working on the same assignment; they also sought to fix a high rate of "obesity." Feeling more confident and prepared, I again used the questioning technique to help them consider another perspective. My questions helped them think through a new angle of their intervention plan, which inspired them to add a subsection describing their efforts to decrease potential negative side-effects of their proposed actions.

Later on, my assistant director and I spoke again about the dynamics of these sessions. At the core of this second conversation was the idea that questioning can be used to encourage more critical thought about a topic from various perspectives. In retrospect, I could appreciate how, through my questions, I had succeeded in getting the students of these two sessions to think about their "obesity" rate topic from a more fat-positive perspective rather than a medical perspective.

TAKEAWAYS

Through sharing our stories, we begin to answer Smith's question of what it means to be a fat tutor. Both our narratives suggest there is a palpable and potentially painful moment that occurs when a fat tutor is presented with a piece of writing built on the premise that their very embodiment represents a cautionary and vile disease for others. What, then, can we as administrators do to leverage our authority to support tutors when writing consultations take such a provoking turn? The suggestions we offer below have the potential to empower not only fat tutors but all tutors.

MAKE SPACE FOR SESSION BREAKS

Amanda's story differs from Paula's due to her ability to give her client a task, momentarily leave the session, and talk to her supervisor. Amanda had a relationship of trust with her assistant director that made his office a collegial space where she knew she could take a break to discuss the session. Conversely, Paula did not have an administrator nearby, but she would have benefited from a moment to collect herself or talk strategy with a tutor or director.

Administrators should consider discussing with tutors how and when to pause consultations. The need for this conversation became apparent during a recent staff meeting at Paula's center. A

brainstorming session about how tutors could take actionable steps to confront Whiteness in their center led to a suggestion of being able to "tap out" of a session during which a client shared racist content. However, having a policy like this in place does not mean tutors will always want to pause an ongoing session or will feel comfortable doing so.

To address this potential hesitancy, tutors can be encouraged during staff training to make space within sessions for any needed breaks. In Paula's current center, tutors are taught to assign writers small tasks during sessions. Prompts such as "highlight the topic sentence of each paragraph" or "freewrite about your topic" work well to engage the writer. If tasks such as these become a routine part of sessions, tutors may find it easier to take a break when needed, just as Amanda did. Such a policy provides a safety net for not just fat tutors but all tutors.

Concerns about tutors' well-being conflicting with clients' requests for help are not new to writing center literature. In Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison's account of meeting with a client whose writing proposed the exploitation of Black women, Morrison, a Black woman, shares that she thought of leaving the session but remained due to a felt "obligation to help" the writer (25). Ultimately, Morrison's client left the session grateful for the help received, but the question remains for Morrison—and for all tutors—"Where was the line between my obligation to the student and my own personal safety?" (26). The answer to this question is inevitably complex and subjective. Each tutor becomes responsible for deciding at what point continuing a session becomes untenable. Administrators can invite tutors to prepare for situations that might be especially troubling for them using the "Cope Ahead Skill" created by psychologist Marsha M. Linehan, creator of dialectical behavioral therapy ("Cope"). Prompting tutors to name their own boundaries and reflect on how they might react to a piece of upsetting content ahead of time can help them know when to continue forward or take a break from the session.

GIVE TIME TO FAT STUDIES

In addition to engaging tutors in discussion and reflection about how to react to problematic content, we encourage administrators to include fat studies literature in their training curriculum. Many centers appropriately include discussions of how to best support specific student populations, including English language learners, BIPOC students, and students with disabilities. We suggest including fat students as part of these discussions and point to Corey Stevens' "Fat on Campus: Fat College Students and Hyper(in)visible

Stigma" as an excellent introduction to the challenges students in larger bodies often encounter.

Including a text such as Stevens' affirms fat tutors and helps non-fat peers better understand a diverse range of student experiences. Ideally, fat tutors would also feel comfortable approaching administrators or fellow tutors about experiencing anti-fat bias or harassment. Such communal conversations can generate powerful connections between tutors, while also underscoring the collaborative nature of writing centers. Thus, including fat studies scholarship has the potential to spark a valuable opportunity for individual growth and community building.

NOTES

1. In the fat acceptance community, "obese" and "overweight" are derogatory terms for naturally occurring human diversity that encourage unfounded and harmful negative attitudes towards fatness (Wann xii-xiii). Hence, we use scare quotes around these words.

2. Thank you to Dr. Wenig for his support while we drafted this article.

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EDITORS' CORRECTION

In the December 2022 issue of *WLN*, on p. 12, the article by Megan Kelly, Kelly Krumrie, Juli Parrish, and Olivia Tracy has an error in the institutional affiliation listed there. The authors are all at the University of Denver, not at the University of Pennsylvania. Our apologies for the mistake that somehow crept in.

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