

“Everything Counts”: Impacts of Centering Social Justice in a Writing Center

Graham Stowe
Canisius University

INTRODUCTION

Writing centers have long contended that the experience of working as a peer tutor has substantial benefits for tutors themselves, beyond just improving their own writing abilities. Numerous studies have shown that serving as a writing tutor can lead to gains in communication and interpersonal skills, increased confidence, and invaluable hands-on experience for future education or career paths (Hughes et al.; Bell; DeFeo and Caparas). Since the turn of the century, writing center scholarship has also increasingly called for incorporating principles of social justice into our work, arguing that our centers should strive to create more inclusive, equitable, and empowering spaces for marginalized student populations (Condon; Driscoll; Faison and Treviño; Geller et al.; Greenfield; Greenfield and Rowan). However, there has been limited exploration into how implementing a social justice-oriented approach to tutor education and training may shape tutors’ development, not only as students but as socially aware citizens more broadly.



GRAHAM STOWE

This study investigates the potential impacts of a radically-oriented, social justice-centered, tutor training curriculum on those tutors’ personal growth, self-awareness, and civic engagement within and beyond the context of the writing center. Drawing inspiration from critical pedagogy traditions and Freirean notions of love, dialogue, and critical thinking as central to humanizing education, I designed—and refined over the course of several years—a semester-long tutor preparation course that framed the work of tutoring writing as an opportunity to empower both tutors and student writers. The course developed organically, first by my introducing Paulo Freire’s work to the reading list, and then through my own continued interest in serving as a mentor to my tutors. Throughout this process, I began to consider how the course and training method contributes to the broader project of social transformation toward a more just world.

An extensive body of scholarship has highlighted the diverse benefits for tutors that stem from their experiences working in writing centers. Research has pointed to development of “leadership skills” (Bell 11), professional development and communication patterns (Hughes et al.), and self-efficacy and confidence in writing (Hixon-Bowles and Powell). Beyond these relatively tangible skills, studies have shown working as a tutor improves empathy, adaptability, and self-awareness (DeFeo and Caparas 154–56), and some writing centers have developed programs specifically for improving tutors’ mental health by teaching mindfulness practices (Driscoll and Wells).

Writing center scholarship has also continually called for incorporating principles of social justice, inclusion, and critical pedagogy into our programs and practices. Laura Greenfield has explicitly called for no less than revolutionary change in writing center pedagogy. She contends, rightly, that writing centers should strive to create welcoming, identity-affirming spaces that empower

historically marginalized student populations, advancing equity and dismantling unjust power structures (Greenfield 124–26). Others, too, have studied social justice extensively, with many advocating for anti-racist pedagogies and recognizing the uniqueness of all students who visit the writing center (Condon; Diab et al.; Eddy et al.; Geller et al.; Greenfield and Rowan). For instance, the field has focused on social justice with studies on gender and sexuality (Denny; Denny et al.; Mackiewicz and Babcock; Rihn and Sloan) and labor and contingent employment (Herb et al.). In some cases, writing center efforts towards inclusion overlap with institutional aims, as Dana Driscoll notes that writing centers’ educational aims overlap significantly with wider general education goals of nurturing “civically-minded” graduates who will contribute to society (171). I aim to immerse tutors within a social justice-oriented training curriculum, with the hope that it will have substantial impacts on their civic values, critical consciousness regarding systemic injustice, and sense of responsibility to work towards equity, shaping their personal ethics and engagement both within tutorial spaces and beyond.

To these ends, I rely on Paulo Freire’s educational philosophy to ground the work of a tutor training course. His critical pedagogy promotes teaching practices centered on principles like problem-posing education, empathetic dialogue, praxis, and above all “a profound love for people and the world” (Freire 89) as methods to engage students and teachers as partners in co-creating knowledge aimed at social transformation. Students read portions of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a foundational text, focusing on the relationship between love, dialogue, and critical thinking. The connection to writing center work is obvious, by emphasizing dialogue, which exists in a dialectical relationship with critical thinking. Tutors and students engage in dialogue that both “requires critical thinking” and is “capable of generating critical thinking,” setting up a recursive structure that creates and recreates new dialogue and sets up both tutors and students for more engaged critical thinking (92). Dialogue is the “encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (88). The goal of dialogue, in other words, is to find meaning, and the creation of meaning is the creation of a new reality for students. At the center of these dialogues is love.

Love is *the* way into a Freirean dialogue. Freire writes that “[b]ecause love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others” (89). Meeting a student in the writing center requires that we teach tutors that it is not only good for them to love—to be courageously committed to—the writers they work with, it is critical to their work. This love will often manifest itself in empathy, in that tutors regularly use their own approaches to writing to help others find their way through the writing process, but it will also be a love that admires writers for who they are and for their work. Freire writes: “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (89).

Teaching writing, then, especially in the case of a one-to-one situation where it is a literal dialogue between two people, requires an acceptance of love between people and the world. By focusing the course on social justice and Freirean philosophy, in addition to developing the practical skills required of tutoring, I aim to teach tutors the importance of critical consciousness and a recognition of the world’s injustices. Ideally, our work contributes to a sense of obligation towards fellow humans and a desire for equity in their writing center work and day-to-day lives outside the center.

METHODS

Through semi-structured interviews, this study examines how tutors see their evolving self-conceptions, mindsets, and actions as socially responsible citizens inside and outside the writing center. After obtaining IRB approval, I conducted and recorded interviews. I interviewed ten of the eleven then-currently working tutors. Eight of the tutors were women and two were men. Two female tutors, one Arab American and one African American, identified as people of color born to immigrants. Four tutors were first-generation college students. There were four sophomores, three juniors, and three seniors, all in their late teens or early twenties. I asked two definitional questions, focused on how each tutor would define writing center work and social justice. I then asked each tutor to describe, if any, the relationship between social justice work and writing center work. Finally, I asked tutors to describe what benefits they saw or foresaw coming from their time working in the writing center. I coded transcripts using MAXQDA software based on categories related to tutors' descriptions and definitions: 1) their work in the center, 2) social justice, 3) the relationship between writing centers and social justice, and 4) the personal and professional impacts they attribute to their tutoring experience.

RESULTS

Tutors agreed on the broad definitions. They defined writing center work as expected, emphasizing practices of conversing with students, listening to their concerns, and guiding them with discussion. Their definitions of social justice were similarly unsurprising, centering on notions of equity, equal treatment, and empowerment for members of marginalized communities through activism, advocacy, and reforming social structures and policies. The results also confirm earlier studies that show that tutors believe their work in the writing center will benefit them professionally (Hughes et al.).

Tutors' perceptions diverged somewhat when discussing connections between writing center work and the broader project of social justice. Six respondents used the words "equity" or "equality," and those who did not relied on similar language, referencing societal inequities related to class, gender, or race. Five respondents made direct reference to inequities in American public education, and seven discussed "differences" or "cultural differences." Two tutors focused on listening skills and allowing others to tell their stories. This growth in listening, in turn, created a greater sense of solidarity with others. As one noted, through dialogic engagement, "I find myself growing to become more accepting of those I probably would have just looked away from [before]." Three tutors explicitly connected their interpersonal growth to wider university values of forming students who care for the "whole person" (a stated aim in the school's mission). Two noted increased awareness of their own privilege and how this shapes their worldview. The answers were less consistent than in the questions defining the terms, however.

Despite varied perceptions of the concrete relationship between writing center tutoring and social justice activism, each participant attributed some personal growth and development to their tutoring experience, which aligned with the course's aims of nurturing more civically-engaged citizens. This growth was shown through an expanded open-mindedness toward diverse perspectives. As one tutor explained, "I try to get out of my own head and see the world through someone else's view. And I think that's what social justice is." Interviewees' references to concrete civic action were mostly vague or went unmentioned; only one tutor indicated substantial engagement in social justice causes outside of the writing center. For most tutors, social justice beyond the writing center as an active pursuit remained more abstract aspiration than realized practice.

The most compelling results came from two tutors who failed to see any relationship, with one stating outright “I never thought of [them as connected].” This lack of agreement suggests the curriculum did not necessarily convey a conception of writing centers as a space intertwined with social change. These two tutors ultimately had the most compelling responses in explaining their understanding of social justice and writing center work. While Ashley stated that they’d “never thought of it,” another tutor, Reza, said, point blank, “no, so far.”¹ I was unsurprised; I thought more tutors would struggle with the question. The day-to-day grind of a semester can make it difficult to connect with others in the way social justice work requires. What was surprising, though, was that after saying they saw no connection between social justice and writing centers, both tutors went on to show very clear lines between their tutoring and social justice. Reza is an immigrant, having been born in a refugee camp and moving to the United States as an infant. After saying she didn’t see a connection, she also stated, “We could be doing social justice work without even realizing it.” She demonstrated a very clear recognition of structural injustices and showed an interest in educational opportunities in the neighborhoods around the college, which have fewer resources than local private schools or suburban public schools.

Ashley’s interview followed a similar trajectory; after seeing no connection between writing center work and social justice, she made some direct connections between the two:

I think it’s made me more aware of, you know, the issues of the world, which are huge and kind of everywhere. And it’s made me more confident in the fact that my generation and people like-minded do have an effect and can have an effect on people even if it’s just, you know, helping someone with a paper and trying to encourage them and make them more confident in their writing. I feel like everything counts and it’s nice knowing that I do have an effect even if it’s not, you know, bringing down a corporation, which would be nice, but I haven’t gone there. Yet.

Like in the first case, here we see a tutor with a nuanced take on her place in the world, showing a recognition that her work in the writing center is not creating large-scale revolution, but that, as she states, everything counts.

DISCUSSION

The difference between Ashley and Reza and the other tutors is likely due to personal circumstances. As Reza is a refugee and an immigrant, asking her about social justice in a writing center seems very small, I suspect. Ashley’s college career has been colored by a deep and significant trauma. The perspective of individual tutors will always affect the way they see the relationship between their work and social justice. All of our tutors are aware of the unfairness of life and the world’s sometimes cruel indifference, but some have first-hand knowledge and personal experience that could make helping a student develop a thesis statement feel insignificant. I would argue, though, that these two, because of their first-hand knowledge about life’s injustices, simultaneously see their writing center work as relatively small and as deeply meaningful. When a researcher in a quiet, safe office asks about the social justice impact of tutoring on the world, it is quite easy to see how these experiences might lead a tutor to immediately deny the connection but then later show how important social justice is to their work. Who could know better the importance of a safe space than a refugee? And who could know better that “everything counts” than someone who knows what it is, as a college student, to experience serious trauma?

The initial evidence provided by this study suggests that integrating social justice as a centerpiece of tutor training may, under certain circumstances, substantially shape tutors' personal growth and identity in ways that advance broader writing center missions of forming graduates ready for civic participation. While impacts varied, most tutors described gains in awareness, perspective-taking, and perceived responsibility to community that stem from a curriculum foregrounding diversity, equity, and radical empathy. Even in cases where tutors did not connect social justice to their roles, the reflective, dialogic practice of tutoring appeared to enhance their disposition towards open-mindedness and appreciation for difference, though most tutors did not trace specific civic actions to the Freirean training course. This underscores Greenfield's contention that many writing centers adopt the mantle of social justice without realizing the kinds of radical restructuring required for transformative praxis. Nonetheless, results suggest writing centers aiming to fulfill broad educational goals should consider social justice's capacity to enrich tutors' development as human beings, not just academics. As I argue here, Freirean love is one important way into helping students grow, and it starts with directors showing the same kind of love to their students, being deeply committed to them and their lives. There are, of course, lines and boundaries, but we cannot pretend that our students are not fully realized individuals when they enter our centers or classrooms for their writing center training, nor that they don't bring with them many tools and perspectives that will make them better tutors. As we commit ourselves to them fully, helping them find their paths to being the best tutors and people they can be, we exhibit the love we expect them to show the writers with whom they work. Ultimately, while translating this work into activism remains complicated, a writing center explicitly oriented towards justice shows extraordinary promise for nurturing more conscious, engaged citizens.

NOTE

1. Both of these names are pseudonyms.

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