

Composing Queers: The Subversive Potential of the Writing Center

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Reflecting upon my first year as a writing associate in the Oberlin College writing center, I have found myself questioning the ways in which I have been taught to write academic discourse, how certain writing functions and ways of knowing have been normalized, and what possibilities might exist beyond the borders of normative pedagogical practices. In attempting to think through these theoretical ideas, I have sensed an ominous (though, until this moment, unknown) gap in both scholarly literature and practical applications surrounding conversations in the field of composition studies and academia in a broader context. This lack—or rather oversight—has found iteration through thinking about my own identity in relation to writing and the writing center as an institution: both are pretty straight (or, to use a more suitable academic term, “heterosexual”). Through my research, therefore, I hope to find ways in which to queer¹ theoretical pedagogical approaches to writing, looking towards the writing center as a potential site for such queering. While many scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition have addressed the (in)visibility of queerness, both as a theoretical framework for engagement in composition studies and as a suitable topic for academic discussion amongst students and educators, little has been said from the perspective of tutors and students about the writing center’s role in resisting, (re)producing, and/or remaining ambivalent towards queer writing pedagogies (or a complex combination of the three). Scholars do cite two specific explanations for a lack of queer engagement: the “compulsory heterosexuality” and heteronormativity that institutions and American society at large demand for students’ sexual identity and the historical amnesia of the histories surrounding the LBGTQ movement. I hope to expand upon these thoughtful preliminary conversations of queerness in composition studies and academic institutions, exploring and critically engaging with the ways scholars have attempted to combat such normalizing pedagogies, which ultimately work to hinder (indeed, silence) many students’ voices. In understanding how and why queerness is noticeably absent in composition studies, I hope to offer ways to resist normalizing discourses, looking towards the writing center as a potentially subversive queer space. By employing an interdisciplinary framework both within and beyond the borders of the writing center, I hope to create space in academia through which queer (and queer-minded) students and educators might find ways to claim a sense of agency in and through writing.

“Compulsory Heterosexuality”: (Sexual) Assumptions in Composition Studies

In John Goshert’s article “Reproductions of (Il)Literacy: Gay Knowledge and First-Year Composition Pedagogy,” he articulates the ways in which students are neither compelled on their own nor institutionally encouraged to apply queerness—or any form of sexual iteration—in their writing. Goshert describes this phenomenon as linked to the implicit (and overt) heteronormative structure that exists in much of academia. As he states:

The connection between developments in LBGT/q studies and composition lies in the assimilation into academe of mass culture's normative values and practices. In both instances that assimilation is predicated on the suppression of critical inquiry, and on allowing students to simply consume and reproduce the discursive products of dominant culture in the classroom. (18)

In other words, true academic critical inquiry is replaced with assimilation into "the discursive products of dominant culture." The classroom and the students who enter it are enmeshed in the (hetero)normative discourses prevalent in American society, which are reinforced as students are in turn taught that writing means assimilating to the sexual status quo. Indeed, as Jessie Blackburn articulates in her book review of Jonathan Alexander's *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, "one of the most important assumptions we can examine with students . . . is the assumption that a classroom is a value-free or neutral space" (229). The cultural laws that govern American society are still present within the classroom.

The lack of a queer framework within the field of composition studies also brings to light the various assumptions academics have about the very nature of what composition studies *is*. In her essay "I Thought Composition Was about Commas and Quotes, Not Queers," Danielle Mitchell speaks of the resistance she encountered from colleagues upon attempting to introduce issues of queerness in a first-year rhetoric class. Though some of her colleagues applauded her efforts, many felt "that writing courses [were] about punctuation, spelling, grammar, and sentence structure" (27). Mitchell found unique ways to combat such discourse, claiming that she was training her students to become "critical citizens" both within and beyond the academy, and that her course goals "revolve around reading, writing, thinking, and public discourse" (27). Mitchell uses queerness as a way to engage her students actively and critically with pertinent political topics and "texts" in both an academic and "public" forum, challenging them to think of the ways reading and writing can *produce* ideas or mobilize action. In their analysis "The Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship," Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace highlight the importance of looking at the intersections of queerness and composition studies, pointing to the ways sexual difference influences both "literacy and political efficacy" and "our ability to speak about our lives," thus impacting "our sense of freedom to participate in [American] society" (W304). Queerness not only has a place within composition studies, it is crucial: it gives students a sense of agency and a way to write themselves into American society. Alexander and Wallace's arguments challenge me, as a writing associate, to think of how my own position(al)ity occupies this important and emerging intersection in either supportive or oppressive ways; as a writing tutor, I have the opportunity (indeed, the obligation) to create an open, low-stakes, and welcoming environment where students are able to uncover the ways they might see their lives communicated through writing. Ensuring the availability of this open environment where students are allowed to take such personal risks is, in essence, a queer practice, one that, until recently, has remained unseen in institutional contexts.

As a transfer student, I have had the opportunity to witness the ways in which these theoretical arguments play themselves out in different academic institutions. When I was a first-year student at a conservative liberal arts college in upstate New York, heteronormativity left its invisible mark on my identity as a student writer. For example, in my first-year, writing-intensive seminar, Introduction to Poetry, there were many classroom discussions about "human nature." These conversations often rested on assumptions about the essential nature of human identity, present "since

the beginning of time” with little regard for differences in cultural and historical moments. One such assumption was the belief that monogamous, presumably heterosexual relationships were both appropriate and “natural.” The discursive techniques utilized by both students and professors lacked the “critical inquiry” of sexuality studies Goshert sees as absent in academic institutions more broadly. How, then, did this moment influence my own identity as a student writer?

If I looked at identity as a rigid, confined, ahistorical, and unchanging entity, my ability to change and grow as a writer was stalled; as my classroom disallowed an academic discourse to legitimize and make sense of sexual identity (or rather, *my* sexual identity), I found difficulty in placing myself within my writing. Thus, my first-year work shows an objective distancing. Such use of distancing and objectivity, it has been argued by numerous scholars, is a distinctly masculine trait. According to Donovan Hohn, for instance, in his essay “‘The Me Experience’: Composing as a Man,” the adoption of such a masculine voice “can result only in a narrowing of possibilities, can produce only a fiction of authenticity and wholeness, a hegemony of one ‘style’ or voice over the many other voices each of us can and do speak” (288). Indeed, as is the case with many first-year writers, this masculine voice seeks authority at the expense of understanding how one’s subjectivity (as informed by one’s sexual identity) may influence writing.

Embedded within these notions of masculinity, I argue, is the implicit assumption of heterosexuality. In ignoring or silencing the possibility of sexual discursive practices within academic writing, as Mitchell attempts to resist through her pedagogical practices, a challenge to hegemonic sexual identities (or even the understanding that such identities *exist*) remains difficult. As an excerpt from one of my first-year papers demonstrates, my attempt to speak in objective, masculine (heterosexual) ways disallowed understandings of the “human condition” in different historical and cultural moments: “For countless generations, beginning with the earliest philosophers, man has constantly questioned his reason for roaming the Earth. This journey has led many of these thinkers, writers, and poets, such as the twelfth-century Afghani poet Rumi and the English poet William Blake, not only to question man’s existence, but to understand his true nature.” As an objective writer, I was unable to account for historical specificity (“For countless generations”) except in ways that reproduced hegemonic, masculine notions of “human nature.” The “trueness” of such nature implies an essential understanding of maleness as both an identity category and a way of understanding and approaching the world. Being a queer, male-bodied, male-identified first-year writer, I excluded myself from my writing insofar as I assumed a masculine position; as one of the tenets of the masculine identity is distinct, compulsory heterosexuality, I disallowed myself the ability to account for my own positionality within my writing. By discursively reproducing knowledge about maleness (and the “trueness” of such a category) and by using the male pronoun to account for humanity in a broader sense, I was unable to work through how my own positionality may have influenced my understanding of the world. As my first-year experience helps illuminate, writing without taking into account my own sexual identity reproduced “appropriate,” distanced, masculine, heterosexual discourse that constrained my identity as a student writer and beyond. I silenced my own voice in this first-year classroom, viewing my sexual identity as distinct from—indeed, as irreconcilable with—my academic writings.

Upon transferring to a more politically conscious institution in my sophomore year, I found that topics of sexual inquiry were considered appropriate modes of understanding my identity as a writer. My worldview was dramatically expanded in informative ways; identity politics jargon became, as if overnight, a part of my everyday repertoire. I scoffed at my pre-Oberlin self, self-

assuredly (and surprisingly nonreflexively) mocking the fact that I had once submitted to the gender binary or thought “gay” was an easily defined, essential category. For my winter-term break, I went back to my first-year institution, an air of (moral?) superiority in my wake, a knowing smirk on my face. When asked by my former classmates about the course of my academic life, I told them I was a “comparative American studies major,” relishing the dumbfounded, confused looks on their faces when I began to describe my newfound academic self. I peppered each conversation with jargon (“heteropatriarchy,” “imaginings of transgender identities,” “queer”) and, dare I say, pretension. As the weekend progressed, the dialogue had ended between my friends and me. Through both my airs and highly specified language aimed at capitalizing on my friends’ unfamiliarity with such discourse, I had created two divisions: I had isolated myself from my friend group while simultaneously distancing my peers from topics of gender and sexual inquiry. Once again I was left with feelings of isolation. I had found a niche within academia to explore that part of myself previously left unspoken, unresolved, and yet the discourse I was attempting to appropriate (and the ways I mobilized such discourse) separated me from my peers in detrimental ways.

I was once again left without a place to reconcile my academic and personal selves. Looking back, it seems as though I was engaging with what David Bartholomae describes as “inventing the university”; in his article of that title, Bartholomae addresses the many ways students attempt to adopt “academic” discourse. Through my unfamiliarity with the discourse present in the academic (inter)discipline of comparative American studies, I was “trying on” these languages, “learn[ing] to speak [the] language” of scholars I had become fascinated by (605). My “air of authority” on gender and sexuality studies was, in reality, an “approximation of” jargon, rather than a true understanding (if such is possible) of this discourse (607). My attempt to write through these ideas in this very article stands as yet another testament to the various ways liberal arts students attempt to maneuver through multiple academic disciplines, each with distinct forms of languages and ways of knowing. I had forfeited one way of relating to the world (heteronormative) for another (queer), yet each set of discourse separated me from communities I wanted to be a part of. How to reconcile my two (or more) discourse communities?

Perhaps the answer might be found in Goshert’s analysis. His article concludes that the lack of queerness within academia (and the field of composition studies) is due to—ironically—a lack of critical engagement with *straightness*. In other words, sexuality in general is rarely a “suitable” topic for academic discussions and writings. Sexuality, as Goshert would argue, is ubiquitous in American society, and yet is often relegated to the “private” sphere. This results in a lack of critical engagement with sexuality of any sort. In order to remedy this lack of engagement, Goshert calls upon his students to “develop a more critical literacy about gender and sexuality, and about social structures that place such a high premium on gender/sexual conformity” (18). Goshert’s model has students look beyond their own sexual identity to uncover the power structures embedded in American society that construct sexualities, valuing certain sexual expressions while marginalizing others. As scholar Robert Toynton states in his article “‘Invisible Other’: Understanding Safe Spaces for Queer Learners and Teachers in Adult Education,” a piece examining queer pedagogy techniques for adult learners, “Only through challenging and making visible the heteronormativity of the environment can the queer student (or teacher) be allowed to feel they belong” (187). By allowing students to think through these various (often invisible) structures of privilege and oppression *through writing*, it may be that both the field of composition studies and academia at large will open up space for nonnormative (or, indeed, normative) sexual expressions. It may

offer students a place to belong. In making explicit the intersection of composition studies and queerness, I feel that, as a writing center associate, I am finding both a productive method and a physical context to bring such discussions of sexuality into the realm of academic discourse more broadly.

What Goshert and others are less successful in articulating, however, are the ways in which heteronormative discourses may be combated (or, at the very least, called into question). According to Gillian Rose in her work *Visual Methodologies*, discourse finds its power through its productivity. In other words, discourse is powerful because it produces subjectivities. The heteronormative discourse in American society disallows the queer subject a voice—it works to render queer subjectivities invisible. As Rose describes, however, such discourse is not absolute:

Discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking and acting, but this is not simply repressive; it does not impose rules for thought and behaviour on pre-existing human agents. Instead, human subjects are produced through discourses. Our sense of our self is made through the operation of discourse. (137)

Mirroring Michel Foucault's discussion of power,² discourses do not operate in a top-down power hierarchy, but rather in a complex web of power, oppression, and privilege. When students write discourse, they are, in a sense, writing themselves. Despite the power of heteronormativity in American society, such discourse does not always produce repressed subjects: moments of subversion can and do exist. Scholar Harry Denny uses queer theory as a way to mobilize such subversion in his article "Queering the Writing Center," describing such theory as analyzing "practices that inscribe meaning, making certain bodies and ways of doing visible and marked and others illusory, invisible or unmarked" (42). Like Denny, I see the writing center as a space to make the invisible (the queer body) visible.

What continues to trouble my own academic and sexual identity, however, are the ways academia has taught me to appropriately engage with sexual identity. As my experience attempting to navigate two academic and personal spheres can attest to, sexual discourse within academia offers the space for both empowerment and new forms of distancing. Even now, as a third-year (and more seasoned) comparative American studies major, I hear from my peers at Oberlin how inaccessible and shaming "my" discourse sounds to those unfamiliar with the tricky terrain of intersectional identity politics. What is the point of gender and sexuality discourses if not to create and make change while building community? How can change commence when such discourse is at best alienating for some, at worst shaming and exclusionary?

Historicizing the Queer Body: Amnesia and Homonormativity

Academics, students, and institutions must now look for ways to create more accessible discourse(s) in terms of sexuality and gender studies, bridging the gaps between queer, academic, and more "normative" communities. How such a discourse may take shape, however, is difficult to determine. While there are academic spaces where lines of sexual inquiry may be addressed, they are often relegated to a few distinct disciplinary categories (most generally found in the humanities and, occasionally, the social sciences), thus offering inclusion for some while excluding others. Who, for instance, has access and the ability to read Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in a productive classroom environment? Unless students and/or educators actively seek out ways to incorporate topics of sexual and gender engagement within writing, heteronormative assumptions will

continue to remain unquestioned across other academic institutions and disciplines. Instead of thinking of queer history as relegated to specific communities, educators must start seeing sexual diversity as part of *all* of our histories, not a select view.

Goshert's article notes the ways in which queerness, both in practice and theory, remains invisible in academic spheres due to the lack of a queer historical framework. He shifts his focus from a (hetero)normative audience to that of queer youth deliberately studying queer literature. Goshert relates that while teaching John Rechy's 1963 novel *City of Night* to (supposedly queer) students, he was met with resistance to concepts such as public sex and other markers of radical queer culture in the 1960s and 1970s. Rechy describes his own reaction to queer youth in academia: "Most gay people think history begins the last time they had sex with somebody. I've pointed out that our history is very long, but the record of it is very short" (Goshert 16). The lack of an archival memory for queer history results in a historical amnesia, both within and beyond the queer community. Queer radicalism of the past has been replaced with a homonormativity, or the desire for LGBTQ individuals to "claim their normalcy within dominant culture" (Goshert 16). The desire to learn of queer culture and history, then, is replaced by a desire to fit in, rather than push against, normative society.

The lack of archival memory and validity for LGBTQ history is also present (or rather, absent) within the field of composition studies and the writing center. Given the implicit heteronormative nature of academia described by Goshert above, one way to combat such normalizing powers is to teach, learn, and—perhaps most importantly—*value* the voices of queer authors and activists of the past. As Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace state, LGBTQ narratives and experience must become a part of academia in a "*proactive way*," beginning "with the premise that queer people need to have their lives and perspectives represented substantively on their own terms and not only as an aberration from some mythical norm" (W309). By employing a critical (queer) pedagogy, students are able to "examine how dominant cultural norms about sexual orientation shape our sense of self" (W309). By demanding the recognition of sexual identity (specifically queer representations) in academia, students and educators will begin to develop an institutional history, which will in turn challenge students to examine the ways we organize our identities around sexual expression.

Thinking again about my own relationship to academic institutions: I assumed as a first-year student that my history as a queer male was *supposed* to be absent from standard academic classes. Queer histories had been simultaneously silenced and actively overlooked by educators in my high school—why should college be any different? Given that I am unable to find a place for myself within the history of American society, it should come as no wonder that writing queerness into academia is a difficult feat. Indeed, in attempting to write through this paper, I find myself grasping at rhetorical straws, paralyzed both by the lack of research on this topic and by my insecurities, feeling as though queerness may not have a place within my identity as a student writer. And yet I cannot help but feel as though something within me (as a result of my sexual identity) pushes me to examine the unspoken heteronormative assumptions within my writing that create my identity as an academic.

Minding the Gap: Interdisciplinarity as Queering Academic Ways of Knowing

How do we bring queerness into theories of composition? How can we ensure that academic institutions (in this case, the writing center) remain accessible both for queer students and queer academic approaches? While queerness is entering conversations among scholars and teachers in the field of composition studies, I would like to propose that the concepts of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality can be useful tools to further the process of queering academic discourse.

Philip Deloria, an American studies scholar, defines interdisciplinarity as an academic approach that allows one to engage a text in multiple, intersecting ways. As he states:

One may enter a project at the level of the text, the context, or the theory. In other words, questions may come from registers ranging from the material to the abstract, and one can weave analyses among these three registers. In doing so, one utilizes different disciplinary methodologies, blurring them together in true interdisciplinary form. (15)

In looking at a text as originating from a specific historical and cultural moment (“the context”), students can better understand their own positionality and identity as directly influencing their writings. Applying a theoretical framework to a text *within* a certain context also adds another layer of analysis that challenges the assumptions implicit in a singular disciplinary framework. Approaching a text in multiple and varying ways not only queers the academic notion of “disciplinary” study as the only legitimate form of articulating knowledge, but acts as a way to check the student’s own assumptions in terms of methodological approaches to texts. In articulating the “context” of their writing, students are encouraged to think about how their own cultural and sociopolitical stance in society may influence their findings. This, in turn, may lead to further engagement with the concept of identity in a broader sense, potentially challenging the normalizing discourses that construct hegemonic identities.

In order for such engagement to take place, “writing across the curriculum” (WAC) endeavors that seek to advance the importance of disciplinary writing in universities may benefit from thinking beyond, across, and between the lines of disciplinarity. In writing this article I am attempting in some way to begin to bridge the gap between composition and queer studies. How would biology papers, for instance, benefit (or at the very least change) from a queer approach in what students choose to write about? Disciplinarity frames not only the way students write, but the way they think, understand, and engage with the world and their identities. Similar to teaching queer histories (again, assuming that such a history is integral to “straight” histories, not separate from them), intersectionality offers space for such engagement between and beyond disciplines.

The Space We Occupy: Accessibility in the Writing Center as Institution

The largest gap in the scholarly literature of composition studies concerns the physical space we, as tutors, occupy in the writing center. How do our identities resist and/or engage potentially oppressive normative ways of being and writing? How does the atmosphere we create as a unit and institution offer space for students to either challenge or reproduce dominant hegemonic (academic) discourses? In a very practical sense, how do we ensure that students feel safe to express non-normative sexual identities?

In attempting to queer the ways in which we think about and do writing, we must also queer

the writing center as an institution that occupies physical space within a structure of power, oppression, and privilege. Indeed, a queer student may not find the necessary support within a writing center that does not recognize his/her/hirs³ identity and/or ways of thinking about writing as legitimate or a cause for serious academic engagement. This “queering,” as I see it, rests on the shoulders of tutors. We must be continually aware not only of the various ways we interact with tutees (and the power structures laden therein), but of how we engage with one another.

In order to think of the writing center as a potentially subversive queer space—employing the aforementioned interdisciplinary/sectional framework—it is important to note both the constraints and the possibilities of the writing center as an institution. In other words, we must first identify the purpose of a writing center and the tutor’s role in creating such a space. As Stephen North’s influential 1984 essay “The Idea of a Writing Center” famously states, “in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: Our job is to *produce better writers, not better writing*” (438; emphasis mine). The burden placed upon the writing tutor, therefore, is to usher a “novice” writer into the realm of the experienced through taking a holistic view of the writing process, using a “participant-observer methodology” (438–39). The process North proposes operates under the assumption that students seeking guidance from the writing center are genuinely interested in becoming better writers and have both time and resources to commit to their writing. Many scholars in the field of rhetoric and composition, however, have challenged North’s idealized vision of a writing center. Indeed, North himself responded with his own critique in his 1994 essay “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center,’” paying closer attention to institutional, cultural, and political barriers that may prevent tutors or students from being “changed.” In very practical terms, a given writing center may be constrained by a lack of funding and institutional support, engagement on the part of those entering the writing center, time commitments/constraints on the part of both student and tutor, and the murky relationship between student tutor and tutee. All of these issues highlight the rift between scholars’ theoretical hopes for a writing center and the practical realities student tutors often face.

What is interesting about North’s original ideal, however, is his call for the writing center to create “better writers”; that there exist constraints upon the writing center is clear, yet the notion that such a space has the potential to change writers, “not writing,” is certainly intriguing. I am left wondering, however, what a “better writer” looks like and how a student tutor and tutee must work together in order to create such change. Rather than think of the writing center as a space in which unqualified, inexperienced writers are transformed into appropriate academics—all the while assuming that student tutors are the gatekeepers to such academic discourse—I would like to see the writing center as a queer institution, challenging academic ways of knowing in place of reproducing suitable hegemonic academic writing styles. For as Denny states, the temptation to reproduce these norms is always already ingrained in those walking into and working for the writing center: “[C]odes of privilege and their rules of usage are often natural to or already learned by us”; “successful academics and students” are successful because of the ways they have (unconsciously) subscribed to such “normalized” writing functions (51). Denny describes this phenomenon as “passing,” stating that those in the “margins” (such as queer people, people of color, first-generation students, and others) are able to negotiate their stance between “margin and center” in adopting specific types of “appropriate” academic discourses. How, then, might we ensure that the writing center does not succumb to this temptation?

Though these normative realities exist, the central construction of the writing center has, in many ways, queer elements already ingrained into its structure. During my time as a writing associate at the Oberlin College writing center, for instance, I found myself surrounded by academics from numerous departments: from religion, English, and creative writing to clarinet performance, biology, and environmental studies. In like fashion, students who enter the writing center also run the gamut of academic disciplines. The writing center, as a place allowing a unique exchange of academic ideas (and the different ways of writing such disciplines demand), is the ideal locus for the interdisciplinary framework. As Linda K. Shamon and Deborah H. Burns state in “A Critique of Pure Tutoring,” an article addressing the “hands-off” method espoused by North, “[M]ost of us sometimes have difficulty seeing alternatives to our own ways of thinking . . . within a strong system generally held notions and behaviors so permeate our lives that only they seem legitimate or make sense, which all other notions and behaviors seem illegitimate” (231). What better way to challenge one’s (academic) assumptions about the world—one’s epistemology—than to directly engage with those from different academic fields?

As a writing tutor in the Oberlin College writing center, I have witnessed firsthand how students (both tutor and tutee) have their ways of knowing the world challenged in thinking interdisciplinarily. For instance, one evening I was working with a first-year pre-med student who was writing a paper concerning the legal merits of same-sex marriage for a political science course. Though neither the student nor I were well versed in “political science discourse,” we were now asked to work with one another in the late evening hours the day before her paper was due. As we read her paper out loud together, her strong, informative writing style was instantly apparent; the paper was riddled with statistical facts, legal precedence, and historical dates worthy of the work of a seasoned academic. By the conclusion of her paper, I had learned about the political history of same-sex marriage through a lens—namely, the academic style she was adopting—that was entirely foreign to me. I was left a bit dumbfounded by the end, as she eagerly looked towards me for advice, her eyes begging for some sort of constructive criticism or critique. I felt a bit insecure and unsure of what to say. Her scientific background—apparent in her objective language and the setup of her argument—was clearly present throughout her work and I could find nothing inherently “wrong” with her research. The only thing I could think to ask was, “Why did you choose this topic?” She stared blankly at me, the dumbfounded look now on her face. For the first few minutes of our conversation, she appeared resistant to using her own “voice” in her work. Slowly, however, she began writing about her gay brother and her exposure to the queer community as a result. Her paper began to take an entirely different approach to the matter of same-sex marriage, bridging the gap between her personal and political selves. She left the writing center with a new lens through which to understand how to write about the topic of same-sex marriage (by writing about herself), while I had learned a new approach to discussing the future of the LGBTQ movement. Through the writing center, as a result of the interdisciplinary dialogue we participated in, both of our assumptions about writing were shifted in profound ways.

Reflecting on this experience, I have begun to think about the implications for future tutoring moments or (a grander idea) for the future of academic discourse. As I have argued throughout, I see the writing center as a potential interdisciplinary, queer, safe space that may encourage students to take personal and academic risks through writing. While certain disciplines currently frown upon (or actively resist) the inclusion of personal narrative within academic writing, such experiences are crucial in uncovering the way a student knows the world, as evidenced by my exchange with

this young woman. Interdisciplinary dialogue opens up space in academic discussions to show the way our identities act as organizing structures that shape the way we view the world and, ultimately, the arguments we make about it. As Denny states, “Tutorials become spaces where students and tutors alike shore up, build anew, and deconstruct identities and the ways of knowing that are sutured to them” (45–46). In having the writing center act as a space to share and critically think about our identities (both of tutor and tutee), we may be able to queer the way academic fields write about our (subjective) experiences in the world. This queering brings to light not only *how* we come to know the world, but *who* is allowed to know and under what circumstances. Perhaps the writing center, as it seeks to create its subversive potential, should not reject entirely the traditional codes of the academy—for the material negative effects for a student who takes such a risk would be many, not least a failing grade—nor should the center completely acquiesce to such codes either. A complex hybrid of the two approaches may be called for. Denny calls this the “third” type of communication, one that encourages students to “invoke dialects as part of introductions and descriptions of personal experiences,” bridging the gap between “home” or “private” language and “academic” language in ways that render the student legible to a larger academic community (54). These maneuvers may, perhaps, begin the process of queering academic discourse in a broader sense.

Though the writing center has the potential to act as a queer academic space, its physical environment continues to be enmeshed in the (hetero)normative values of American society (and, more specifically, the academic institution to which it is attached). Though interdisciplinary exchange creates possibilities for queer voices to be heard, without institutional support and training for rising tutors that address issues of accessibility for historically marginalized students (queer students included), the writing center may not fully become a place for queer students and queer-minded academics. Just as a feminist composition pedagogy asks its students to “see how the larger culture positions [students] as gendered,” the writing center must also employ a queer pedagogy, one that challenges students to see themselves as distinctly sexualized subjects (Alexander and Wallace W304). In doing so, students will be challenged to see themselves as subjects influenced by normative societal values, subjects whose voices, writing styles, and methodological frameworks are influenced by the ways they are shaped as sexual beings.

Conclusion

I came to this research topic with the hope of finding a way to reconcile my academic and personal selves: to find a way to bridge the gap between the academic disciplines of composition and queer studies, while also attempting to place myself personally within certain academic spaces. In short, this paper is an attempt at belonging.

In considering more broadly the ways academic institutions produce ways of knowing the world, I am challenged to think about what it means to write sexuality into the field of composition studies. This paper arguably stands as one of my most personal to date. The final product feels at once the most uncomfortable yet surprisingly authentic academic paper I have produced. The emotional investment I have made demands not only a certain level of recognition—not simply visibility—but an institutional support that addresses and encourages the types of risks queer students take in writing about sexuality. As Toynton points out, “While being both other and invisible, [the queer student] is subjected to a burden of emotional work of a different order of magnitude to that of the privileged majority” (187). While the emotional work of the queer student may be different

than that of those more in line with normative sexualities, it remains clear that sexuality in general continues to be the source of much anxiety both within and beyond the academy. Through combating heteronormative discourses (in writing), addressing and valuing the histories of LGBTQ persons, and using the writing center as a queer, interdisciplinary space, however, perhaps queer voices (and, in turn, all voices) will find safe spaces of iteration within academia. For indeed, the writing process can be a profoundly personal, emotional task for any student; until we begin to validate such emotional investments, we cannot queer, alter, shift, and/or call into question normative pedagogical writing practices.

Notes

¹ By “queer,” I refer not only to a nonnormative sexual identity, but to a process by which academic, political, and/or cultural normativities are defamiliarized, shifted, altered, and seriously called into question. “Queer” as used throughout my analysis can be understood, then, as an adjective (a “queer” person) or a verb (to “queer,” or to make the familiar unfamiliar).

² For more in Foucault’s discussion of discourse as it relates to sexuality specifically, see Foucault 18.

³ “Hir” is a third-gender pronoun. “He/him/his” would be assigned for male-bodied individuals, just as “ze/hir/hirs” would be for those who do not conform, either physically or politically, to the gender binary. “Third-gender” does not necessarily imply an essential “third” category of gender, but rather works as a disruption to the gender binary.

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