

CHAPTER 10.

I FEEL IT IN MY BODY:
WC TEACHING AND
ADMINISTRATION AS
EMBODIED PRACTICE

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Put simply, as much as I hope for us to grapple with the identities that circulate through writing centers and tutoring, I also want us to think about the transparency of identity, where bodies and affects seem to exist and perform beyond or past identity, where they seem the “same” or “other.” Facing the center requires an awareness that the identities at the center signify just as richly as those at the margin. (2-3)

– Harry C. Denny

My personal philosophy and my philosophy for the center is that we’re all just humans working with humans; we have to remember that we’re working with people—people with bodies, feelings, and lives outside the academy—and this way of thinking, for many, is rather queer indeed. (19)

– William P. Banks et al.

The ceiling of The Writing Center @ Michigan State University is covered with the traces of those who’ve worked in that space. Separate ceiling tiles are adorned with individual pictures, quotes, and the general artwork of past consultants—part of the face Harry Denny refers to can be found here.¹ These tiles are always

1 At MSU, we use the term “consultant” to refer to those graduate and undergraduate tutors in the writing center. We see them as teaching assistants because they teach and mentor one-to-one as well as in small groups and may facilitate class and community workshops. In addition, many of the graduate students, as well as a few undergraduates, take on administrative roles as coordinators of various programs in the center and across partnerships with the university and community.

there, disembodied from the person who created them, but holding a moment in time, a moment frozen forever, hanging above the work of the center. While the people who created the tiles might be long gone, traces of these humans remain in these tiles. Periodically, you might even find a current consultant staring up at the tiles during a session to get their bearings or daydreaming while looking at tiles between sessions. These tiles, and the ceiling they make up, are more than just pictures; they are a collage of emotions frozen in time. The drawing of Tina Belcher or the picture of blue sky with Samuel L. Jackson as God are more than a funny nod to pop culture; they are pieces of the consultants' past made present every day in a busy writing center where people come in and notice the "cool" ceiling.

We draw attention to the ceiling tiles at The Writing Center @ Michigan State University to illustrate a point: writing center spaces are emotional spaces because clients, consultants, and others bring their emotions and experiences into the writing center space when they come; they bring them on their bodies, in their writing, and in the interactions that occur in/through the space of the center. Furthermore, these emotions and experiences often linger, like ghosts, charging the space with emotions that can, sometimes, be confusing and exhilarating. Our ceiling tiles charge our space with the emotions of consultants of the past, and when we mix those emotions with the ones of the consultants whose bodies make up the center itself (along with the writers), the center can become a space where emotion is everywhere, all the time. Sometimes, consultants can become overwhelmed with this emotion and feel stifled by it. Other times, consultants thrive in having a space to really feel their feelings.

Generally, though, the writing center space is one in which emotions and feelings are one-sided; they come from the client, the writer—not the consultant. When consultant emotions and feelings show up, we're taught to set them aside in favor of the needs of the writer. However, what do we do when a space, like the space at MSU, is already filled with consultant emotions? What do we do with the emotions of the past that already take up the room of the writing center space? How do we let—or not let—these emotions affect us as consultants, teaching assistants (TAs), and administrators while still helping our writers become better? Our simple answer is that we work to embrace the emotions around us instead of ignoring them; and we do this by paying attention to the ways our bodies feel and move in particular spaces. According to Blitz and Hurlbert, "Our stories—our own and those of the students with whom we have worked in writing centers—are from various quiet margins. We're not even sure that writing centers themselves are central to anything other than the living stories that fill, not only the students' writings, but also the air in the rooms" (84). This air affects the way we, as consultants who are in the writing center space

more often than the writers themselves, move and work in the space and what we allow and don't allow ourselves to feel at work. Ultimately, though, this air is haunted by those who've come before; the center is made up of the ghosts, the traces of former consultants and writers, whose leftover emotions can physically change the atmosphere of the room.

In this chapter, we explore what it means to work in a space filled with your own and others' emotions when you haven't necessarily been trained to deal with either. We welcome the varied emotions and experiences in the writing center space as a way to visibilize writing center liminality, and we demonstrate this through the telling and theorizing of personal stories coupled with writing center and administrative scholarship. We present this collage of stories/bodies/theories through a mixing and blending of our own authorial voices and previously published voices, indicated through the use of italics, as a way to show the blurred lines that emotionally-charged, heteroglossic spaces, like the writing center, can create.

BUT FIRST, A STORY

This closer look at the individual is important to us, perhaps, because graduate student administrators are positioned between two worlds. Socially and experientially, we are graduate students with important personal ties to the lives of other GTAs: they are our friends, our own support network, and our most immediate peers and colleagues. But as administrators, the director relies on us to supervise and administer those same people, to help her monitor, train, and develop their teaching performance. It is in this greatly undefined, overlapping space that we often find ourselves in very complicated positions that are never truly of our own choosing. (106)

– Stephen Davenport Jukuri and W. J Williamson

Before 2018, as a TA and research assistant (RA), I, Rachel, always felt a little emotionally and professionally stifled in the writing center because I'd come back to school with lots of professional writing center experience under my belt and not always an outlet for it as a student consultant. I felt like I was walking around with two faces: one was the outward-showing face that I displayed to friends and co-workers at work that seemed to go along with the rules and duties of the jobs in front of me, and the other was the one I saved for my family and home life that was professionally frustrated with a lack of a release for my professional experience. In 2018, all that changed.

My mother had a stroke in November of 2017, and, for a while, it looked like she was going to recover, but the recovery road was going to be long and

hard. After fleeing to my home state of Tennessee upon hearing news of the stroke, I finally felt comfortable enough to return to Michigan in early 2018, just in time for the spring semester and for our spring writing center orientation to begin. Sitting in this orientation, I was noticeably distracted. My family had started a large group text during my mother's illness, and the constant beeps and chirps from my phone felt like imminent warnings that I couldn't look away from. With my phone silenced, I tried to pay attention as Trixie, the writing center director, led the group in a team-building exercise—but my phone buzzed and I grabbed it. Instead of a private message to me, I found out in the group chat that my mother had suffered a second stroke, and that this one was much more devastating. Initially, upon reading the news, my first instinct was to *act cool* because I was at work surrounded by a lot of people and this is what I'd been trained to do, not only as a professional but as a woman. This lasted mere moments before I fled to a nearby empty classroom and broke down.

Soon, a friend and writing center administrator followed me out to check on me, all the while reassuring me that it was okay for me to head back to Tennessee to figure out what was going on. I'm grateful for many things during this time period, but when I look back on this particular day, I'm especially grateful for that friend and that private classroom.

My mother would eventually go on to pass away from that second stroke, the one I found out about during writing center spring orientation, and while I continue to grieve her loss every day, I'm surprised at how much I associate her loss—and my grief—with that particular writing center. After coming back from the funeral, my entire association with emotions and feelings in the writing center changed. When once I felt guarded and two-faced, I now didn't have the strength to care if friends, colleagues, and writers saw me express my emotions freely. I cried openly at work all the time because I couldn't help it, and I talked about death and grief. A lot. The writing center became a place for me that was not just a workplace, but also a place that housed the last visual of me before my mom passed, the last visual of me as a daughter with a mother. The writing center is literally the place where I found out about her illness getting worse, and it's the place where my own emotions bubbled over at almost every table and in almost every session for a season. And I let them. In fact, I was encouraged to allow my emotions to be at the forefront of everything I was doing by my administration because they knew there was no way for me to keep them in.

During this time, I leaned, as much as I could, on my administration to tell me when I needed a break or, even, to simply tell me what I needed because a lot of times I didn't know myself. I'd experienced loss before, but never like this, and I'd never experienced it while going through the academic and professional struggles of graduate school. When I was struggling with whether or

not to come back to school after my mother's funeral, I was transparent with my writing center administration, Trixie included, because I knew I could trust their judgment as colleagues, bosses, and friends. While the advice they gave me didn't come from places of experience, I trusted that they had my best interest in mind. The truth is, none of us are trained to handle deep family tragedy as academics, much less as TAs and writing center consultants, so we do the best we can. We muddle through it, and, in doing so, we sometimes let our messy lives show to the very people we've been trained to keep them private from.

When I finally decided to come back to school and work, I was messy. Gone were my two masks from my earlier days as a graduate student, replaced now with a gaunt stare and free-flowing tears. The writing center space that I came back into wasn't the space I left. Now, this space holds different memories and emotions for me. I would find myself looking around the room and think: "that was the table at which I used to talk with mom on the phone during my break; that was the table I was sitting at when I got the text message; that was the window I would stare out blankly when I wasn't tutoring." I was not okay, and I allowed myself not to be okay in public because I didn't have a choice in the matter.

Ultimately, my grief forced me to experience my emotions in a very public way in a very public space, but there was something comforting about crying and being sad in the writing center. Knowing that others had come before me and carried their emotions in that space allowed me to feel a sense of freedom that I don't think I could have gotten everywhere. In the thickest parts of my grief, I would sit at my "grief table" in the writing center, look up at the ceiling tiles, and know that somehow I wasn't alone. For me, I could feel the emotions in the air that Blitz and Hurlbert talk about, and while I, myself, felt like a ghost and a shell of a person, I felt like I was also walking with the ghosts of past consultants who'd cried and grieved silently and publicly in the writing center.

NOW, LET'S PAUSE FOR A BIT OF THEORIZING

I think a lot about ghosts. No, not white-sheeted apparitions, but the ghosts who appear in the stories we tell each other here in the academy. Not only those arisen from the mess of blood and bones upon which "America" is literally built, but also those rooted in other knowledges, other ways of knowing, other ways of being and becoming that frequently go unheard and unsaid in much scholarly work. For me, ghost stories are both the stories of material colonization *and* the webs and wisps of narrative that are woven around, under, beneath, behind, inside, and against the dominant narratives of "scholarly discourse." I think a lot about what ghost stories can teach us, how in telling them I might *both* honor the

knowledge that isn't honored in universities *and* do so in a way that interweaves these stories with more recognizable academic "theorizing" as well. For me, this is the most exciting component of "alternative discourses"—telling a story that mixes worlds and ways, one that listens and speaks, one that participates in Lyotard's language games as both a rule governed subject and a paralogic trickster, a *use*, as deCerteau would have it, that is more tactical than strategic, a pose that uses historical knowledge as a heuristic in creating a written, writing self (Royster 2001b). (12)

Malea Powell (emphasis in original)

In their article "If You Have Ghosts," Blitz and Hurlbert open with the story of Gloria, a refugee coming to the writing center for help with a piece of writing. During her sessions, as one is sometimes apt to do, she opens up to her tutor about the danger her family faced—still faces—fleeing El Salvador to come to America. And then, one day, Gloria stops coming to the center, as writers usually do when they are finished with a piece of writing. The consultants are shaken by her absence and worried about Gloria's safety, but, of course, they have no way of contacting her, and they know that's inappropriate anyway. It's as if Gloria is a ghost. The authors say, "Gloria carried the stories which must be told and heard but which are easily lost against the 'academic wallpaper of words' (Okawa, 1997, 94), the empty formalities of what too often passes for serious academic work" (86). The "serious academic work" of the writing center, is, of course, helping students to become better writers, and not necessarily tuning into their emotional states; however, isn't writing just that? To be a good writer, doesn't one need to be aware of, if not in tune with, their own emotional state? Blitz and Hurlbert say that the ghosts of former students "haunt" the writing center, and their presence shows up in our lives in everyday moments that we might not expect or anticipate. As Powell notes, we have to pause and think about what these ghost stories can teach us.

Likewise, Sara Ahmed would say the lingering is because the writing center is a sticky place where emotions cling to the objects in the room, and when we are oriented toward certain objects, we are likely to get the stickiness of others on us. How does one measure what is sticky and what isn't, then? "I do not want to presume an associate of the literal with the physical body and the metaphorical with language" says Ahmed (91). She goes on:

Certainly, there are different forms of stickiness. But the sticky surface and the sticky sign cannot be separated through any simple distinction between literal and metaphorical. Rather, stickiness involves a *form of relationality*, or a "with-ness," in which the elements that are "with" get bound together...When

a sign or object becomes sticky, it can function to “block” the movement (of other things or signs) and it can function to bind (other things or signs) together. Stickiness helps us to associate “blockages” with “bindings.” (91; emphasis added)

The “with-ness” of objects creates an invisible sticky film on/in/through them that leaves traces behind. These traces literally and invisibly bind us to certain objects. Additionally, these traces, then, cling to other objects creating a transference. To elaborate, Ahmed says:

A sticky surface is one that will incorporate other elements into the surface such that the surface of a sticky object is in a dynamic process of re-surfacing...But stickiness of that surface *still tells us a history of the object that is not dependent on the endurance of the quality of stickiness*: what sticks “shows up” where the object has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become a part of the object, and call into question its integrity as an object. (91; emphasis original)

Much like the effects of a sticky substance on a surface, emotions that fill a room get stuck to the surfaces of the room. As Blitz and Hurlbert would say, emotions fill the air. However, Laura Micciche explains, “Rather than characterize emotion exclusively as a reaction to a situation or a tool used to create a reaction in an audience, we need to shift our thinking to examine how emotion is part of the ‘stickiness’ that generates attachments to others, to world-views, and to a whole array of sources and objects” (1). Emotions, in other words, help to form our relationships; they are relational, and when we form relationships with objects and places, our emotions become attached to those things as well as leaving them open for others to experience when they come in contact with the same objects and spaces. However, we have to be careful how we view emotion because, historically, it has been bound up with unintellectual thought. “As a result, then, of historical processes that have constructed emotion as dangerous and untrustworthy,” Micciche says, “emotion has been the object of a large-scale dismissal, rendering invisible its principal work on how we come to orient ourselves to the world, including how we develop, interpret, and analyze our own investments in the things we value through complex social and cultural rituals and norms” (6). While emotion has largely been invisible, “what gets mystified in traditional views of emotion is the extent to which emotion expression and perception are mediated rather than natural responses to a situation” (Micciche 6). Rachel’s grief was a natural response to the situation she was in;

her expression of it in the public space of the writing center, while perhaps not *natural* or *unnatural*, was, thankfully, also not mediated because she was fortunate enough to have administrators who understood that the writing center is a place where humans help humans, and humans emote, sometimes publicly.

The field of writing center studies has taken up the mantle of emotion work of late, with the recent publication of several works on mindfulness and self-care in writing centers (Brentnell et al.; Caswell et al.; Concannon et al.; Degner et al.; Giaimo; Green; etc.). While this is good news for consultants and administrators, the practice of being emotional in the writing center *as a consultant or GA* is still uncommon praxis. Scholastically, a consultant's identity is still one wrapped up in the hats they wear (Ryan and Zimmerelli) or the approaches they take to consulting. Additionally, we recognize that "it's often uncomfortable to be vulnerable with others, especially within public spaces" (Brentnell et al.). Yet, we see vulnerability in the center from writers all the time. Why is it harder to recognize vulnerability from our consultants when they express it? We might argue, as Brentnell et al. do, that we actually see vulnerable moments from consultants all the time. They say, "evidence of vulnerability is present in the objects left behind in the center: in neglected plants left to die on the tables...in the magnetic poetry constructed to describe a client or consultant's grief or apathy, in the toys and crayons broken and pulled apart after an anxiety-riddled session" (Brentnell et al.). These moments are made possible because the writing center, like the classroom, is a place "alive with bodies, hearts, and selves, and because learning is joyous, exciting, frightening, risky, passionate, boring, disappointing, and enraging" (Micciche 105). Because "emotion matters have materiality" and "they are lived and expressed in and through bodies and cultures," we/consultants are sometimes at the mercy of our/their own emotions (Micciche 105). Likewise, "writing involves sticky attachments that evolve and materialize through the writing process, including emotioned attachments that find their way onto the page [and into the air] sometimes against our will or without our conscious assent" (Micciche 106). In the world of writing centers, where writing has power and objects are sticky with the emotions of former and current writers and consultants, space becomes messy. It is important to acknowledge the messiness of emotions and the liminality created for writers, teachers, and administrators when the space welcomes both ghosts from the past and living, breathing emotions in the present.

AND NOW, ANOTHER STORY

...working in the writing center really equipped me to deal with confusion and uncertainty. No two days are ever the same, and that's part of

what makes it fun and rewarding. Whenever a student sits in a tutoring session with me, for example, she needs my help immediately. I am forced to be resourceful when I don't know answers, and I'm forced to be calm even when panic seems a more obvious state-of-being. Helping to direct the writing center as a coordinator amplifies both the challenges and the lessons of being a writing tutor. But I have learned to accept that I do not know everything I need to know before I need to know it--I learn as I go. This aspect of my work in the writing center has been instrumental in helping me to meet the challenges of being a graduate student, even when it's still confusing, scary, and uncomfortable. (116-117)

– Andrea Alden

My, Trixie's, office has seen, and now holds, a wide range of TA emotions, reactions, and experiences. The box of Kleenex has a prominent place on my desk, right between my seat and where TAs and other consultants, and even clients, often sit across from me in the room to talk through questions, issues, and opportunities. As books and papers pile up on my desk—which inevitably happens every semester—the box of tissues gets moved to the top as a signal that emotions, tears in particular, are welcome in the space. Over the years, these tears have accompanied many different embodied experiences and feelings: hurt, anger, rage, disgust, distress, confusion, worry, grief, excitement, possibilities, and ah-hah moments.

I remember, for example, the grad student who couldn't decide if staying in academia was the right choice for her: did she want to be a part of the racist, patriarchal academy that was enraging her in this moment? Did she even need to finish her dissertation? Would serving on one more committee or getting X fellowship help her know what she wanted to do, or not do? Each question was sobbed through apologies for crying in my office.

There was also the graduate coordinator in the writing center who was mad at the disrespect she was feeling from a couple of her colleagues. Her angry tears fueled her anger even more as she exploded in my office and sought ways to be professional and firm with her co-workers. She wanted to demonstrate her knowledge, her sound pedagogical choices, her deliberate choices for policies, procedures, and curricula in a clear and expert manner. Rightly, she saw this experience, this work as a graduate leader in the writing center as practice for her future career as a writing center director, where she would have to demonstrate her knowledge over and over again to various stakeholders throughout the university.

Likewise, I remember several instances of hurt and confusion from gay men in my office. They all knew that they had much to offer our program, the field, the academia at large, but they were also unsure of their ability to both publicly and privately handle the emotional labor of this work. Writing about the needs of LGBT graduate students and administrators, for example, was emotion(al)

work as they received public backlash from leaders in the field where they expected to receive support or at least consensus. It was also creating additional labor at home as it affected their relationships and own wellbeing.

These stories—and so many more not told here—resonate in my office every time I enter it. The emotions linger and remind me why I stress over and over to those I'm mentoring the reason why I have an open-door policy and why I see mentoring as the key component of my job. They also echo in the space as new graduate coordinators enter through my open door to talk about the experiences on their minds. The stories of my office as safe space are not just told by me; the graduate students themselves pass along these stories and encourage their colleagues and mentees to seek out the space when they need advice, have a good idea to share, have struggles or questions, want to learn more about their roles in the center and the academy. This lingering stickiness means that I continually live with these emotions and experiences; some days they are stronger than others, depending on my own embodied feelings and emotional labor on any given day, but they are always there reminding me of the students, amplifying their work, my work.

A REFLECTIVE MOMENT

A MENTOR'S PERSPECTIVE: LEIGH

Finally, as someone who directed the writing center while a graduate student, I know that the stresses of academic life can affect mentees' lives and, consequently, their work. As they cope with tough courses, qualifying and comprehensive exams, theses and dissertations, job searches—and with disruptions to their personal lives like moves, weddings, divorces, and children—I try to be supportive and make reasonable allowances. Often that translates as being a friend and listening; sometimes it means a temporary adjustment of a schedule or workload, like covering their classes or hours.

As professionals, directors/administrators have a responsibility to share their expertise and help the next generations of directors/administrators, but, in doing so, the journey is very much a complementary one. (57)

– Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, many of us seek this very difficult job [WPA] because we love to teach and are thoughtful about curriculum development. If we are honest, some of us believe we can do better than the WPA we knew. Some of us prepare ourselves to do such work through coursework; still others take a job assisting the WPA in order to put some of our ideas

into motion. However, graduate students who prepare themselves for the intellectual work of the WPA may carry with them unacknowledged feelings of conflict about the job. (43)

– Roxanne Mountford

How do you, as a graduate student, prepare for the conflict of the job when the job itself is emotion-filled, ever-changing, and human-dependent? In what ways can we really prepare to handle other people's emotions in public places, as well as our own? As we've said, we might argue that one can prepare for this by remembering that empathy goes a long way in the writing center, and that consultants, just as much as the writers they work with, need to be able to express their emotions in spaces that make them feel safe or brave. We might also argue that in the space of the writing center we are always already feeling emotions—ours and others'—all the time, and this emotion must have an outlet. Acknowledging that the center space—the very air in the room—is complicated and messy helps us to remember that consultants are not *only* in the writing center to help writers with their writing. Sometimes, consultants come to the writing center because it is a liminal space already filled with lingering traces of happiness, joy, anger, frustration, grief, confusion, rage, etc. As administrators, and as seasoned consultants, it is our job to understand that the writing center space can be transformative, even when there is no writing involved.

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