Writing Center Work as a Social and Collaborative Act of Reflection: Literature Review

In the writing center students come to talk about their writing. These students may name their intentions as "proofreading" or "editing," yet when the consultation is taking place it takes the form of a conversation. According to North, "Nearly everyone who writes likes - and needs - to talk about his or her writing, preferably to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen, and knows how to talk about writing too" (440). The type of conversation that North mentions takes place between the peer tutor and the student, and it has become a part of the writing process that has transformed the traditionally solo act of writing into a social and collaborative act of reflection.

Writing itself can be viewed as a form of conversation. In the article *Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'* Bruffee views writing as "a technologically displaced form of conversation" (91). From this perspective, if writing is a form of conversation, then conversation in the writing center is incredibly valuable to a student's own writing process. The conversation in the writing center can aid the student in developing ideas, but it can also transform these ideas into a cohesive structure and provide the vocabulary and framework necessary for the student to transfer their ideas onto the page. In conjunction to this concept, Kostelnik writes, "A conversation where a writer puts forth and explains her thinking is nearly the same thing as the composing process. Conversation is not *just* a means to an end; it's a means *to* writing itself" (132). Kostelnik is describing the conversation between the writer and another individual as a natural part of the writing process and not simply as displaced conversation. So if it can be assumed that writing is a form of conversation, and that conversation itself is an invaluable part of the writing process, how does it fit into writing center pedagogy?

Traditionally, writing has been viewed as a primarily solitary act. The writing process, from its exigence to the final draft, was principally left up to the writer. Yet the very concept of writing centers contradicts this traditional perspective. Writing centers add a social element to the writing process, and it is this social element that has become a fundamental part of the writing process. In explaining the orthodoxy of current practices in writing centers, Shamoon and Burns explain the concept of illegitimate collaboration between the writing center peer tutor and the student as occurring when the peer tutor gives the student the answers rather than asking questions (226). They further explain that these peer tutors must promote revision and clarity in the text without imposing their own ideas and knowledge (227). This perspective is hierarchical and places the peer tutor in an authoritative role as it is assumed that they know the answers and are attempting to guide the student to them. In direct contrast to this approach is Brufee's concept that peer tutoring is a collaborative effort that creates awareness of writing as a social artifact and as a conversational exchange (91). This is supported by the social-constructionist view, mentioned by Shamoon and Burns, that sees writing as a social act rather than as "a process of personal discovery or individual expression" (228).

The social act of conversing with a peer on the subject of a student's writing in order to produce better writers is not a new concept to the traditional writing center pedagogy. In his foundational article, *The Idea of a Writing Center,* North stated, "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). What is different is the context by which these conversations are understood. A student who brings a piece of their writing to the writing center is not necessarily expecting to work with a professor or an expert in their field, they are looking to work with a peer. There is an element of collaboration that makes both the peer tutor and the student aware that the piece that is being worked on is a social artifact and the writing itself takes

the form of a conversational exchange (Bruffee 91). In his 1992 article, Lunsford states that collaboration "leads not only to sharper, more critical thinking (students must explain, defend, adapt), but to deeper understanding of others" (3). The conversations that take place in the writing center have a prominent place in writing center pedagogy, yet it is the concept of collaboration that seems to make many scholars uncomfortable due to the potential for a hierarchical dynamic to emerge. Kostelnik offers the notion that students must be taught how to listen and learn from one another and that the format of a one on one consultation is ideal (131). By teaching peer tutors, and therefore the students, how to talk about writing perhaps could prevent this hierarchical dynamic and the possibility of the illegitimate collaboration that Shamoon and Burns mention.

One last aspect that deserves mentioning is that of reflection and its place in the social and collaborative act of a writing center consultation. Kostelnik mentions that questioning is an essential part of writing center pedagogy as it helps writers to think critically about their texts and that questioning is an intrinsic element of reflection (138). In a similar line of thought, Bruffee states that reflection is something we learn to do with and from other people (90). In a writing center where conversation and collaboration are central to its pedagogy, reflection seems to be the logical next step in the discussion. To argue that writing is a form of displaced conversation, and I would further add that writing is an inherently reflective process, then the conversations in the writing center should have an implicit element of reflection. In creating better writers, which is the central tenet of writing center pedagogy, shouldn't reflection be a fundamental part of the conversations in the writing center?

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