

Texas State University-San Marcos

Thesis Proposal

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Major: MA Rhetoric and Composition

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Tentative Title: Valuing the Ethnic Voice in Writing Center Tutor Training

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Please attach on a separate page(s): the problem; research questions; proposed strategies for data collection and analysis; and source(s) of data. Information should be given in sufficient detail to enable the committee to give your proposed thesis intelligent consideration.

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Valuing the Ethnic Voice in Writing Center Tutor Training

The cultural context of what happens in English classrooms in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) provides the premise for creating a writing center which has a tutorial approach culturally sensitive to students seeking help with their academic writing. Before addressing the issue of culture in the classroom, I must acknowledge the pedagogical tension observed by scholars in the field of composition studies relative to a changing student population in higher education. Based on the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Fall 2008, Hispanics make up 11% of the national enrollment of degree-offering postsecondary institutions, and “Overall, the baccalaureate degree attainment rate for low-income, first-generation students after six years was only 11 percent compared to 55 percent for their most advantaged peers” (Hussar 66; Engle and Tinto 13). Hispanics, however, make up “42% of the 1.3 million students enrolled at HSIs,” a number which will continue to grow as the minority population continues to increase (Kirklighter 17). The statistics depict the growing presence of minority students, whether first-generational students or not. More specifically, Mexican American students attending higher education raise concerns in the academic community that is manifested in several publications attempting to address educators’ concerns in assisting minority students.

For example, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education sponsored by the Council for Opportunity in Education published *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students* by Jennifer Engle and Vincent Tinto. This report examines issues affecting educational opportunity of particular student groups by providing data from the U.S. Department of Education based on the degree attainment rates of low-income and first-generation student groups. They also expose the barriers underprivileged student groups face in the pursuit of a baccalaureate and suggest various avenues for increasing

the retention rates of underprivileged students (3). Ultimately, Engle and Tinto desire to inform practitioners and policy makers so to make curricular changes to better serve low-income, first-generation students. As Engle and Tinto state, “We discuss the barriers that low-income, first-generation students face to achieving success in college, as well as the strategies that colleges and universities can pursue to address these barriers and improve these students’ chances of earning degrees” (6).

Engle and Tinto’s report informs my study which seeks to begin theorizing a tutorial approach culturally sensitive to non-traditional students seeking help with their academic writing. Engle and Tinto define low-income, first-generation student groups as demographically older, female, disabled, students with minority backgrounds, non-native English speakers, having dependent children, having earned a high school equivalency diploma, and students who are financially independent from their parents (8). Although Engle and Tinto suggest ways to increase the chances for this underprivileged student group to succeed in higher education. Among their suggestions, Engle and Tinto emphasize the need for institutional faculty and staff to apply a broader range of pedagogical skills to better engage low-income, first-generation students (26). In my study, I attempt to provide a cultural context of the institutional literacy practices so as to construct a culturally sensitive tutorial approach that will better serve minority students when they seek help with academic writing at the writing center.

Another example of a recent publication addressing issues of underrepresented student groups struggling in higher education is *Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students: Lessons Learned at Hispanic-Serving Institutions*, co-edited by Cristina Kirklighter, Diana Cardenas, and Susan Wolff Murphy. This collection of essays shows the pedagogical and curricular tensions our nation faces today with the emergence of a growing ethnic community seeking a higher

education and soon becoming the nation's future middle class. In a forward to *Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students*, Michelle Hall Kells articulates the need for the field of composition studies to examine the kind of academic discourse taught in higher education, specifically in comparison to the discourses produced by the student population of HSIs (vii). Kells acknowledges the range of rhetorical skills students at HSIs have as a resource when applying different pedagogies to develop students' literacy skills (ix). Yet Kells confirms a struggle creating a literacy battle in the classroom; as she says, "In the past ten years, composition studies has seen the growing representation of 'frontline' teachers as well as nationally recognized scholars interrogating notions of academic discourse and approaches to writing instruction as these relate to historically unrepresented student groups" (vii). The questioning of academic discourses by pedagogical approaches, though, has been ever present in academia due to the ever-changing political climate in American society.

The history of rhetoric and composition studies provides an understanding of the influence institutions have on teaching writing, thus exposing the ideological structures which place a strain on educators who are facing the changing social, economic, and political climate in the composition classroom (Berlin 5). In *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*, James A. Berlin legitimizes rhetoric and composition studies as a field of study. He recognizes the pedagogical, theoretical, and political forces influencing both theory and practice in the teaching of writing in American colleges the twentieth century. Even though one could argue against Berlin's sweeping history of rhetoric and composition studies, Berlin's approach positions composition courses as an essential facet of higher education; because, as he states, "Literacy has always and everywhere been the center of the educational enterprise" (1).

Currently, literacy is still tied to learning, and institutions still use particular literacy practices to mark a student's intellectual ability to produce knowledge.

The literacy project, though, was originally housed in all American colleges and was governed by particular cultural concepts which embody the ideologies of the dominant social class (Berlin 5). Institutions carry values and ideologies in the teaching of writing; for as Berlin says, "literacy involves a particular variety of rhetoric—a way of speaking and writing within the confines of specific social sanctions" (3-4). The academic sanctions on literacy production in higher education in turn control the way students view reality. Both Kells and Berlin expose the tacit expectation of any academic culture shaping the minds of the future middle class in writing classrooms all over the nation, but if the literacy enterprise continues to historically under-represent student groups, then the social, economic, and political conditions of educating our nation's emergent middle class will cripple the idea of a democratic American consciousness. Broadly speaking, the cultural complexities in HSIs support academia by sustaining particular sanctioned literacy practices, which, as minority students continue to fill our nation's classrooms, will dismantle the myth of equality in higher education and its power to grant social equality. This predictable outcome inevitably will occur if pedagogical approaches do not become sensitive to cultural aspects of minority students.

In this thesis, I will show how writing center tutor training is supplemental to the literacy enterprise of institutions of higher education. I will also show how the pedagogical tension caused by the changing student demographic fosters the need for culturally sensitive writing center tutor training as to aide in retention. Currently, non-traditional student literacy practices and rhetorical skills are marginalized by the mainstream's creation of knowledge, which Nancy M. Grimm describes as not valuing any other literacy practices that are not mainstream (45).

Like Berlin, J. Elspeth Stuckey in *The Violence of Literacy* in 1991 also articulates how literacy is tied to social class and ideology, which, when left unexamined, can sustain a system of power by using the definition of literacy as a weapon against those not favored by the system and which is set up to keep a new middle class from succeeding in American higher education (126-7).

Similarly, Grimm argues for a postmodern perspective for researching writing centers, a perspective which creates a more democratic theoretical approach to studying student writing (118). Both Stuckey and Grimm call for a deconstruction of the dominant definitions of sanctioned literacy practices. Their work allows me to merge a social theory of learning as articulated by Etienne Wenger with a view of the institution as a community that values particular literacy practices. This community provides a context for exploring how minority students must navigate various kinds of academic practices in order for them to be validated in the academic community.

In this study, I will conceptualize the institutional literacy enterprise as a “community of practice,” which then allows me to view knowledge as socially constructed so as to merge theory and practice by constituting culture as a factor in creating a culturally sensitive tutorial approach. In the first chapter, I will apply Wenger’s social theory of learning as a theoretical framework to view the HSI as multi-faceted and to identify how minority students negotiate their identity to learn academic writing (5). By analyzing the culture of the academy, I will attempt to reframe the academic community as constituting a context to examine the sanctioned literacy practices in academic writing. Because of sanctioned literacy practices displacing non-traditional student discourses, these students often seek help at writing centers, which furthers a need for having a culturally sensitive tutorial approach to help minority students conceptualize their authority in academic writing.

Wenger's social theory of learning will therefore provide a framework that breaks down the idea of learning as a social practice and factors in components that characterize social participation (4). I will use his definitions of four major concepts that affect learning with academic writing to forge a cultural perspective on academic writing. By using Wenger's framework, I can view learning, not as a separate act, but as interconnected with a community, which in this study is the academic institution. More specifically, I will articulate how minority students negotiate their identity and academic community as they create meaning when they use academic writing as a literacy practice to learn in higher education.

Furthermore, I will identify the cultural complexities pertaining to the identity construction of minority students in academic writing. I will show the rhetorical situation of minority students in the classroom as they negotiate their identities among the varying pedagogical approaches to teaching writing. By identifying the cultural complexities involved in the identity construction of minority students in academic writing, I will show the orthodox pedagogy that places alternative literacy practices and rhetorical skills at a deficit. Three epistemological categories, the objective, subjective, and transactional, influence the ideological assumptions found in the theory and practice of orthodox classroom pedagogical approaches. They were used in American colleges, between the years 1900-1985, to identify proficient writing (Berlin 5). Though Berlin's examination of rhetorical approaches used in classroom pedagogies dates back more than twenty years, many of these core pedagogical approaches appear in variations among current pedagogical practices in higher education. I will use the three approaches articulated by Berlin as a foundation to examine the academic community and will use Wenger's theoretical framework to provide a context for the ideological concepts found in each rhetorical approach.

In chapter two, I will explore the theory and practice of peer tutor training to expose the cultural assumptions that often label minority students as carrying deficit literacy practices in the academic community. Students labeled as practicing deficit literacy practices, either by professorial identification or student self-awareness, make the writing center the place a minority student can learn to navigate the multi-faceted expectations of academic writing (Newman 44). I will suggest a role the writing center plays when helping minority students with academic writing. Current mainstream tutorial practices remain pervasive in writing center work. Its current practice is supported by positivistic classroom practices that support a superficial, generalized, and natural understanding of academic writing. Such mainstream practices found in writing center tutor training are demonstrated in Jeff Brooks's "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" which describes the "hands-off" way of helping students with writing. As Brooks says, "Ideally, the student should be the only active agent in improving the paper" (224). The goal of the minimalist approach to tutoring is to allow students to keep their individual autonomy in writing.

At a deeper level, however, Brooks fails to acknowledge the mainstream ideologies tied to academic writing and how mainstream curricula under-represent alternative literacy practices. So, by virtue of the literacy enterprise fostered by intuitionist literacy practices, the non-traditional student never "owns" their constructions of knowledge. Grimm would agree, for as she asserts,

In the autonomous model, writing center work appears innocent and helpful.

Writing centers are supposed to support nonmainstream students so that they can learn the skills necessary to be successful in an educational system that wasn't designed with them in mind. When literacy is understood as a neutral skill

detached from culture, the literacy practices of school seem to be universal, the way that good people naturally behave. (31)

Grimm deconstructs the cultural assumptions of traditional tutorial approaches and provides a space for a discussion in support of alternative tutorial approaches to help minority students negotiate their literacy practices in the academy.

In chapter three, I will attempt to gain a better understanding of the theories used by writing center directors in the training of writing center tutors. I asked ten writing center directors to provide a list of ten published works that most positively influenced their work at a writing center, specifically in the training of writing center tutors. Out of the ten, six directors provided a list consisting of a mixture of landmark essays found in writing center journals about peer tutoring, sources on writing center administration, sources for tutoring second-language writers, sources on alternative rhetoric, and publication about literacy studies which explore the sociopolitical issues found in language acquisition. Over all, the six lists of publications were diverse, and the e-mail turn out did not provide me with any solid idea of what theories best suited the training of tutors to work with students with writing. In general, the diversity of publications listed by the six writing center directors allows me to conclude that each writing center is serving a particular context of students, causing each director to seek diverse resources to serve their particular student community. Similar to compositionists at HSIs and to better serve a particular under-represented student groups, the writing center directors could be working with students practicing varying literacies as reflected in their writing, which can lead writing center directors to question academic discourse. Also, the e-mail responses imply a need for research in alternative tutor training on issues of culture which influence a student's racial

identity as manifested in alterative writing styles as they negotiate their identity to meet the expectations of academic writing.

For example, *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*, by Geller, et al has a chapter entitled “Everyday Racism: Anti-Racism Work and Writing Center Practice.” This article is a discussion held by five writing center directors articulating issues of race in their writing center practices in their pursuit for social justice at the writing center (106). They question orthodox tutorial practices so as to embrace anti-racist efforts in working with cross-cultural student writing (105). Similarly, in *The Tutor’s Guide: Helping Writer’s One to One*, Lea Masiello’s article, “Style in the Writing Center: It’s a Matter of Choice and Voice,” explores the various styles of writing practiced by different academic disciplines. Tutors can use an understanding of these various styles to help students navigate their writing style to meet the voice, purpose, subject, and audience of their paper (Masiello 55). Masiello articulates the tailoring of literacy practices tied to the writing style preferred by particular academic disciplines. She advocates for tutors to aid students to take ownership of their writing and become a part of the “community of language users” in developing a stylistic consciousness of academic writing (64).

In chapter four, I will use Wenger’s aforementioned theoretical conceptual framework to create a more culturally friendly tutorial practice that fosters a minority student’s identity in academic writing (Grimm 118; Wenger 5). First, I will merge Wenger’s social theory of learning with Kenneth Bruffee’s underlying theory of collaboration in peer tutoring to provide a context to forge a culturally sensitive tutorial approach. The theory of collaboration, expressed by Bruffee in “Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind” and “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” links the creation of knowledge through thinking and writing.

This theory of collaboration is similar to Wenger's social theory of learning, because for Wenger, one of the first steps in rethinking a social theory of learning is to focus on participation. Similarly, Bruffee explains how a community cultivates a way of thinking; as he says, "The first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better and learning to establish and maintain the sorts of social context, the sorts of community life, that foster the kinds of conversation members of the community value" (640).

Although Wenger and Bruffee conceptualize the importance of social communication through writing in creating meaning and knowledge, Bruffee deems collaborative work as enabling a "resocialization" or as re-defining learning not as monolithic but as a *process* of learning ("Peer" 216). Because Bruffee values the skills the student can offer in collaboration with peers as they negotiate their constructions of knowledge within the conversation of an already existing knowledgeable community—the institution, he is re-defining writing as a "social medium" —a tool to cultivate expression ("Collaborative" 649, 641). Bruffee's reacculturation fosters a community of collaborative peer learners theoretically enables minority students to contribute their literacy and rhetorical skills in a community of learners in the classroom. But traditional academic modes of teaching foster hierarchical structures of teacher-student that hinder the creation of a community of students (Trimbur 22).

In chapter five, after merging Wenger's social theory of learning with Bruffee's collaborative learning through peer tutoring, I will analyze *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* by Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner. Gillespie and Lerner in chapter four, "Examining Expectations," articulate ways for tutors to be sensitive to a writer's background, which is tied to difference, in cultural expectations due to language, ethnicity, gender, race, and class (21-22). Although Gillespie and Lerner emphasize the need to practice tutor sensitivity to a writer's

background, they also address issues of communication, collaborative goal setting, responsibility, institutional influences, while emphasizing the need for tutors to be both flexible and in control of the strategies used to communicate writing as a process to a student writer (59). Yet the issues they use to guide tutors in cultivating “cultural sensitivity” does not escape the repressive sociopolitical underpinnings a minority student writer must overcome in negotiating identity and community in creating meaning through academic writing.

I will draw from the previous chapters where minority students are positioned in the college classroom when academic writing defines the creation of meaning in higher education so as to explore the paradoxes found in peer tutoring. For example, Trimbur’s “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?” exposes the hierarchical structures between teacher-student. A power-play between student-peer relationships undergirds a contradiction in the idea of an equal relationship between peers, as articulated by Bruffee (23). Exposing the hierarchies found in peer tutoring motivates me to create a culturally sensitive tutorial approach. So in conducting an analysis of “Examining Expectations” from *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, I can examine how the text defines learning as tied to the a minority student’s creation of knowledge based on meaning, practice, community, and identity in academic writing. This kind of analysis exposes the political principles shaping the tutoring which in turn will allow me to create a culturally sensitive tutorial training approach attuned to minority students negotiating their identities in academic writing.

Why is the creation of a culturally sensitive writing center tutorial approach to training tutors important, and what are the gaps in current published writing center tutor practices that increase the need for a cultural approach in tutor training? The need for writing center research to solve the problems of changing student populations is echoed in North’s “Revisiting ‘The Idea of

a Writing Center” (1994). North, among other things, addresses the concerns of the writing center by calling for writing scholarship that takes on an “alternative trajectory” which moves writing center theory into new frontiers (90). By theorizing issues of culture in writing center tutor training, I provide an alternative approach in helping students whose identity, community, and literacy practices give new meaning to the world they describe in academic writing.

Such cultural influences on writing center tutor training can help bring to focus the frustration illustrated by Anne DiPrado’s “‘Whispers of Coming and Going’: Lessons from Fannie” and Judith Kilborn’s “Cultural Diversity in the Writing Center: Defining Ourselves and Our Challenges.” DiPrado demonstrates how mainstream practices create tacit expectations of the writing of non-mainstream students which lead to frustration and misunderstandings and which sustain an ethnocentric bias on both the tutor and the student. More specifically, writing center publications have begun to engage issues of race influencing writing center work, which not only create misunderstandings but which expose the socio-political forces affecting literacy practices. For example, Judith Kilborn informs us about how the socio-political forces created by the multicultural population of students are creating change to writing center practice. As Kilborn says, “If we are to survive and thrive as the population in the United States becomes more diverse, we in writing centers must adapt our services to the changing clientele” (391). Kilborn acknowledges the need for more “culturally sensitive tutor practices” which reflect a cross-cultural tutoring approach which in turn recognizes various literacy practices, while also setting a goal in recruiting minority and international student tutors (398-9).

The need for understanding the student’s cultural background in tutor practices can better assist minority students with their academic writing. I will examine the effects of the ethnocentric literacy practices of minority students, which I also call the new emergent middle

class, and the reality is that the diversity of college students will increase, thus causing the need for greater cultural sensitivity in teaching writing. Beverly J. Moss and Keith Walters in “Rethinking Diversity: Axes of Difference in the Writing Classroom” recognize that the demographic shift in the student population in higher education will eventually lead to the following results: “...no single ethnic group will constitute the majority of Americans: instead, the majority will soon be composed of various groups of ethnic minorities that have traditionally been underrepresented in these same institutions” (417). The collage of cultures that will increasingly be found in English composition classrooms will seek to pressure changes in a classroom pedagogy that values the worldviews articulated by various groups of ethnic minorities in writing. The deeper question is whether current minority students will have to continue to be the targets of a frontline pedagogical disjuncture between theory and practice, or does change have to wait until American demographics reach equilibrium?

In *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing*, Helen Fox’s pedagogical approach provides an answer to the pedagogical disjuncture between theory and practices by fostering a rhetorical stylistic inquiry that values multicultural perspectives in teaching writing. Fox demonstrates the cultural struggles students from different cultures have with academic writing (xix). Fox concludes by showing how the cultural differences in writing styles expose the negotiations, social identity constructions, and idiosyncratic self-expression of a worldview that cannot be unlearned. Though Fox recognizes the difficulty of coaching faculty to unlearn their cultural assumptions, she still attempts to encourage compositionists to embrace a multicultural perspective. My research will focus on how the writing center can embrace a multicultural perspective in tutor training to think about how minority students negotiate their identities and communities through literacy practices to create meaning as they write academic papers.

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