Texas State University - San Marcos
San Marcos, Texas

PROPOSED THESIS RESEARCH

Date: December 12, 2007  Student ID: 531307

Student's Name: Courtney L. Werner

Major Department: English Department

Style of manual to be used: MLA

I submit for approval the following description of my Thesis Project

Tentative Title: "Negotiating Authority: Age in the Writing Center." This project seeks to examine writing center tutors' perceptions of student-writers' ages and determine whether or not tutors believe their perceptions affect writing center conferences.

Please attach on a separate page(s): the problem; question to which answers must be found; proposed procedure; and source of your data. Information should be given in sufficient detail to enable the committee to give your proposed thesis intelligent consideration. BE AS SPECIFIC AS YOU INFORMATION WILL PERMIT, PARTICULARLY ABOUT SOURCES OF DATA.

(Committee members should be approved graduate faculty.)

Committee members:
(Please type names of departments)

Dr. Rebecca Jackson
Committee Chair

Dr. Teya Rosenberg

Prof. Nancy Wilson

Dr. Michael Hennessy
Department Chair

Signatures indicating willingness to serve on the committee.

Committee Chair

Department Chair
(Committee Assignment Approval)

Dean of the Graduate College
(Committee Assignment & Proposed Research Approval)
Negotiating Authority: Age in the Writing Center

The Problem
According to current research, more nontraditional students are enrolling in colleges and universities than ever before (Geiger, Jacobs, Stoner-Eby, Knowles, Moss, Soles, Spellman, Thomas). At Texas State University, nontraditional students currently make up 42.14% of the overall student population (http://www.ir.txstate.edu/Facts/xfacts.html). Nontraditional students have special learning circumstances and needs, especially within the context of the writing center, where they may work with both traditional and non-traditional-age tutors, students between the ages of 17 and 22 (Geller, et. al, Bruffee, Trimbur, Pratt). To date, however, very little writing center research has been done on age-related issues in the writing center, in particular the attitudes tutors of all ages might hold about working with non-traditional age students. In this study, I propose to examine this particular age-related contact zone, paying close attention to tutors and student-writers’ perceptions and assumptions about age as these play out in the writing center conference.

Contact zone theory offers a useful lens for thinking about the interactions between tutors and non-traditional students in the writing center and the attitudes each might have about the other. Contact zones are areas where the expectations, assumptions, and attitudes expressed by one community conflict with those of another. Often, this conflict can be beneficial and may lead to a positive learning experience where both communities grow as attitudes change and assumptions are broken down (Pratt, Bizzell, Lu). Although much research suggests the need to acknowledge the contact zone created when students of varying ages and backgrounds work with one another, none goes far enough in understanding what attitudes and beliefs nontraditional and traditional students have about working with each other, or the struggles that might surface during a tutorial session between two students with drastically different ages, where either the tutor or the student-writer is older or younger than the other. For example, Trimbur and others have discussed the issue of authority in peer groups, but thus far authority issues have not been explored in relation to age. Trimbur sees a distinction between working outside the academy as a peer and inside the academy as a tutor, but not the distance that so-called peers have from one another. Will a 22 year-old peer tutor truly be a peer to a 45 year-old student writer? Does writing experience or expertise negate the age difference? Not only do these issues have yet to be explored, but we also do not have any studies, quantitative or qualitative, that help us better understand the attitudes and assumptions any tutor may have about nontraditional students, the students’ needs during writing center sessions, actual tutor-student interactions, etc. Tutors are often pushed to acknowledge their prejudices, but never does the idea of an unconscious or tacit prejudice against adult-learners arise. There is no teasing out of the relationship between peer tutors and nontraditional student-writers.

This quantitative descriptive study (Lauer and Asher) is designed to begin exploration in this area by examining the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions tutors of both traditional and nontraditional age hold about working with nontraditional students and their perceptions about the experiences they have actually had with nontraditional students up to this point. Often, nontraditional tutors and adult-learners speak out about the pressures and trials they face in the academy and in working with other students and tutors, but there is little discussion of how tutors view their work with nontraditional students (Geiger, Gravani). Therefore, it is also important to identify tutors’ thoughts, insights, predicaments, assumptions, and approaches to working with
older student-writers. This research is not only beneficial for understanding what may happen during this type of tutoring session, but also for tutor training. It stands to reason that as more and more nontraditional age students enter the academy, traditional age writing center tutors will need to learn how to navigate and mediate writing center sessions with these adult-learners. The following research questions will guide this descriptive qualitative study:

- What assumptions about students of “nontraditional age” do tutors bring into the writing center?
- In what ways, if any, do tutors find themselves—and the students they work with—articulating their age and/or status during the session?
- Do tutors perceive their age as affecting control of the session?
- Do tutors perceive student-writers’ ages as affecting control of the session?
- How do tutors’ life experiences play into the tutorial in terms of how they perceive their authority, power, and knowledge working in the session?
- What implications do any findings have for tutor training?

This kind of study will pave the way for future studies that might further deconstruct age-related contact zones, helping us to understand tutors’ interactions with nontraditional student-writers in new ways. More research will help us reconceptualize tutors’ attitudes towards age and the work they do with nontraditional student-writers in the writing center conference. The valuable information we gain about tutors’ attitudes will lead to new conceptions of tutor training, appropriate actions, and ways to enhance writing centers’ learning environments that take tutors’ preconceptions of the students they work with into account and adapts those attitudes by critically examining them to revision the space of the writing center. This study may bring ageism to the surface in writing centers and allow researchers to look more in depth at the power dynamics in any writing center conference, how the tutors we hire and the students at our institutions change, affect, utilize, draw on, and adapt to those power dynamics.

**Methodology**

In order to fully understand how tutors negotiate tutorials with nontraditional student-writers, I will use a quantitative descriptive research design to address the research questions above. I will begin by gathering writing center scholars’ attitudes about ageism in conferences. I will do this by querying the international writing center listserv, WCenter-L. By initiating my study with a discussion in this prevalent writing center listserv, I hope to gain an understanding of other writing center scholars’ work and ideas on the topic. Additionally, because human participants are vital to this study, I will also follow procedures outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In addition, I will develop (and later gather) consent forms from the participants who I intend to interview.

While I am conducting discussion on WCenter, I will also begin working with the Texas State Writing Center to develop a list of participants. Participation from tutors will be completely voluntary. I will create a survey to distribute to the Texas State Writing Center tutors of all ages. I hope to receive at least half of these surveys back in order to tabulate them. The surveys will consist of a variety of questions, not just questions focusing on age-related issues, in order to create a more balanced survey that will be less likely to influence participants’ answers. The survey will consist of yes/no, Lickert Scale questions, and short answer/open-ended questions (which will precipitate follow-up interviews as well as give me a more thorough understanding
of responses from participants I may not be able to interview). The variety of question types will allow participants a variety of ways to think about different situations they encounter within the writing center.

The survey will allow me to collect data in qualitative and quantitative forms. Participants will have an opportunity to voice their experiences and thoughts, and I will be able to tabulate those responses. After tabulating responses, I will begin to draw conclusions about whether or not age affects how tutors perceive the student-writers they work with during writing center conferences. After distributing and then collecting completed surveys, I will follow up with participants from Texas State’s writing center. I intend to interview tutors to more fully flesh out my understanding of their responses to the survey. I will ask interviewees questions pertaining to age in writing center conferences. The qualitative data I gather from these interviews will be integral to drawing conclusions from the surveys, as the interviews will give me a heightened understanding of tutors’ responses. Additionally, the use of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as some agreement in their outcomes, will act as way to triangulate my data. Finally, as another method of triangulation, I will work with participants during my analysis stages. Participants will see the conclusions I am drawing from surveys and interviews, and they will have the opportunity to comment on those conclusions. By member-checking in this manner, my data will reflect participants’ interpretations of the data as well as my own.

Limitations
This study is limited in that the sole methods of data collection will be the distribution of surveys and the interviews I will conduct. A larger project would afford for a more in-depth study involving field observations, conference transcriptions, and interviews with both tutors and student-writers, but this study is merely an attempt to uncover one aspect of how tutors’ assumptions and attitudes about writers in writing center conferences describe how communication between those tutors and writers is perceived.

Finally, while the data collected in this study may not be generalizable beyond the Texas State University Writing Center, it will work to start a conversation about age that as yet, has been largely ignored. The study will provide us a starting point for more in-depth studies of age-related issues in the writing center.

Conclusion
Because the writing center tutorial is an area replete with contact zones, it is important to understand the attitudes and beliefs that influence tutors’ work with student-writers. One contact zone that has not been approached in writing center theory or practice is that of age. I suspect attitudes about age affect tutors as well as nontraditional student-writers in different ways throughout the duration of particular tutorial sessions. This study will attempt to identify these attitudes and assumptions, as well as offer new tutoring strategies and educate the field about the types of conflict and friction that may occur during tutoring sessions between students in these groups.
Works Cited


WCenter. Listserv.
Bibliography


WCente. Listserv.
