Writing center ethics and “non-traditional students”

We’ve chosen a “semi-trialogue” form for this essay—in part to symbolize our ongoing conversations on the issues we raise. Thus, each of us maintains an individual voice (labeled by last name) in what follows.

Gardner: In the first five minutes of our session, I’ve found out that the forty-something woman sitting with me—we’ll call her Bea—is divorced, is in the midst of her first semester in college (which she’s finding overwhelming; she’s the first in her family to go to college), and has two children—one of whom is in daycare for exactly 36 more minutes. The commute is 15 minutes, the paper is freshman comp and due tomorrow, and she’s at her wit’s end.

So when I hear those words I’ve grown so used to hearing from the mouths of 18-21 year old, single, white, upper-middle-class kids who aren’t working and are living on campus, “I don’t have time for much”—for reading aloud, for open-ended questioning, for looking at our resources, for talking through a past graded paper, etc.—I find myself admitting she’s right. She doesn’t have time for much. She also doesn’t have time to hear that folks who have some demographic similarities to her—so-called “non-traditional students”—are not commonplace in research on writing centers in general (Cynthia Haynes-Burton’s “Thirty-something Students” being the notable exception) —much less work on writing center ethics. That, to lots of educators, she’s been invisible.

I get the distinct sense she already knows that anyway.

She does, clearly, fall into a category of students who are common in ethics literature—that of what Michael Pemberton calls “the Quickfixer” with a capital “Q” (“Student Agendas” 12). Many of her fellow non-trads that I’ve seen do, too—often approaching the writing center as a business, or, dare I say it, bank of writing knowledge. But her request that I “give her paper a quick proofread” and her subsequent cajoling and pushing for me to be more and more specific about just what she should do with her paper raise a number of questions circling around this locus: Should I handle her request differently because of her profile and because, quite honestly, at first glance, I take her “I don’t have time” a lot more seriously than I ever took it from those “traditional” students?

My answer—and that of the undergraduate tutors at my University’s writing center, a few “traditional” and many “non-traditional” in lots of rich and exciting ways—is a resounding maybe. In what follows, I group those questions under three large rubrics—the ethics of assumption, the ethics of practice, and the ethics of mission (though I see some crossover between the areas and want to say immediately that many of the questions go beyond just the issue of “non-traditional” students and writing center ethics). Two of our writing center’s peer mentors respond to each of the groups of questions—sometimes by asking more questions, and often by trying to chart out complex negotional processes in dialogue with tutoring styles and philosophies they’ve developed over several hundred sessions. Kambria McLean is close to “traditional” in terms of age, but “non-traditional” in that, in addition to being a full-time student (a junior majoring in English Education/Honors), she’s married and the mother of two. She joined our writing center in 1997; students consistently praise her patience and willingness to explain complex issues clearly and in-depth. Cynthia Lyman just graduated from our honors program with a focus in writing; at age 39, she is considering graduate school. She joined our writing center when we opened our doors in Fall 1996 and has been an active mentor to a generation of tutors.

The Ethics of Assumption

Gardner: I tell my students that all assumptions are, at base, unethical. . .

Is it fair to make assumptions based on a student’s age? I’m thinking not only of some of the negative stereotypes that exist un- or semi-spoken—that non-trads all share Bea’s scenario, lack time, are highly stressed, suffer from the effects of some pedagogies we now see as counterproductive, are hesitant to work with younger students (tutors), etc.—but also of some perhaps equally damaging positive stereotypes. One 49-year-old tutor joked with me about how many of his professors treat him as a sort of “model minority”; with all of his life experience, he must be better organized, better “put together,” more ready to work, more goal-centered, more savvy. Certainly he could never be a Quickfixer. . .

While we’re at it, why do I take an older student’s quick-fix request so much more seriously than a younger student’s? Are Bea’s stakes higher? Different? Has she been forced into—and now simply trying to live within—the boundaries of the Quickfixer?

What ethical problems does the term “non-traditional” bring up intrinsically? “Traditional” applies to so few of my students that I find the term at points laughable; even my 18-year-
olds are working 40 hours/week off campus. Though I don’t want to push the analogy too far, “non-traditional” seems to have as little signifying power at this point as the term “non-white” does in discussions of race.

Beyond this, I want to echo and re-spin John Trimbur’s questions about the linkage between “peer” and “tutor”; whose peers are we talking about, anyway? I’m also concerned—especially after a reading of Pemberton’s thoughtful piece on “special needs” students—that the very term “non-traditional” itself locks us into a group identity and thus a set of strategies. Given my earlier linkage between “several non-traditional students” and the label “Quickfixer,” the terms themselves may lead us to practice based only upon generalizations and stereotypes.

McLean: As a young tutor, I find it difficult sometimes to achieve the balance of power I feel I need in some tutoring sessions with older “non-traditional” students. As much as I try not to, I react differently to older and younger students: I find it easier to use humor with students nearer to my own age, for example; with older students I worry about whether they will see me as too “unprofessional.” And when responding to a “non-traditional” student’s paper, my deep-rooted upbringing forces me to think about respect for authority. It makes me somewhat embarrassed: as much as I declare the need to treat students equally, the issues seem to become somewhat confused in practice.

My experience with “non-traditional” students leads me to believe that I do make some of the assumptions typical of teachers and tutors: I tend to think of “non-traditional” students as older, and, because, I tend to assume that older students have a better grasp on some of the material, I explain some things less than I would to a young student just out of high school. I assume that older students will have a larger vocabulary, more knowledge of social and cultural events, and more experience with the “real” working world. Conversely, sometimes I feel as though I treat them like idiots, explaining every detail of a thesis statement in my assumptions that they have been out of school for so long.

On the one hand, I feel as though I’m cheating some of the “non-traditional” students if I don’t spend the same amount of time with them as I do with younger, more “traditional” students. I limit my strategies and approaches. It’s not even as simple as asking “Do you have much time” as that I’m not sure students always know what’s best for themselves. If I’m teaching them a valuable lesson, one that will affect their writing permanently, isn’t it worth a little extra time for them? On the other hand, who am I to decide what’s best for another student? Should older students hold this spell-binding power over us, “forcing” us toward shorter sessions and decreased productivity, or should we ignore the demands of childcare, work, and family, in order to give students lengthy but perhaps more productive sessions?

I think that power and directivity are inextricably bound together. Even though there are levels of directiveness, I think that the more we lean toward directiveness, the more power we seem to take from the student. For example, imagining a completely directive tutoring session (for me) brings to mind a tutor who, pen in hand, crosses out sections and inserts his/her own words. The least directive would, perhaps, take a much more Socratic approach, never touching the pencil and trying to draw the answers out of the student through strategic questioning. I’m not convinced that either polarization is beneficial; I think a balance is necessary. Generally, though, I think that the student whose tutor does less work on their paper (though, of course, not in the session) would probably feel more empowered.

Lyman: As a “non-traditional” student, I remember the first time I heard the term, and my reaction to having such a label applied to me. It was my first semester behind a school desk after almost 15 years of being away, and so much academic jargon was like a foreign language to me; I was in a 400-level class for several weeks before I even realized upper-division courses were considered most appropriate for advanced students (and at this point, I was “advanced” only as far as my age was concerned).

“Non-traditional” does seem to increasingly be a contradiction in terms—beyond just being an overused stereotype that covers a broad range of students—and so there seems to be a real danger in assuming that any student who hasn’t entered the university directly from high school can be lumped into a single category, a collective consciousness with static needs. Whether “non-traditional” or not, each and every student is an individual with specific expectations, agendas, and goals. Although the majority of “non-traditional” students may have more obligations and responsibilities away from the classroom, it seems unreasonable to assume that there is any common thread that links them all together into a single sub-culture within the university. The longer I spent behind a desk, the more aware I became of other “non-traditional” faces like my own; I believe this trend will continue as people of various ages return to school for various reasons—eventually maybe making the term “non-traditional” obsolete.

Ethics of Practice

Gardner: I open this group of questions by hoping that—thanks to the work of folks like Linda Shamoon, Deborah Burns, and Joan Hawthorne—we’re beyond the notion that directive=bad, and nondirective=good. But I’m not sure we are. I’m thinking of similar experiences to those Hawthorne describes—specifically of how presenters at a recent Midwest
Writing Centers Association conference "seemed to assume . . . a commitment to a particular model of writing center pedagogy . . . [an] unspoken understanding . . . that tutoring is about improving the writer, not the writing; practice must follow from that premise. If our focus is on the writer, so the logic goes, directive tutoring is out (1)."

Hawthorne says that less formal conversations with individual attendees, though, "seemed to carry a contradictory subtext. 'Of course the paper is important,' was the contrasting message. 'Writing center tutors work on editing and proofreading because these are important issues. . . . Sometimes we use directive tutoring because sometimes it's the best strategy to use'" (1-2).

Beyond our on-going, complex dialogue with directiveness, we need to recognize the limits our language places on us here, too. Though Pemberton’s discussion of the Quickfixer is balanced and thoughtful, the term carries heavy negative connotations—and William O. Shakespeare’s “manipulative” learner carries even more (13). If Bea is manipulating me, who is at fault? And does anybody have to be at fault here?

Along these lines, but bigger: how do power relations shift when I’m tutoring someone significantly older than me? What are the dynamics of tutoring someone who could be your father or mother? For example: how does this shape or limit the “game of knowing and not knowing” in questioning? What blends of approaches and strategies are available to me? Do we have the time and power to work, for example, at the kind of negotiation Ira Shor talks of—or toward the kind of “social-expressivist” tutorial Don Bushman writes about (6)? And given that time seems to be Bea’s central concern (and that this concern is shared by several in her “group” and that I take the concern seriously), do we do a patchjob—thinking something is better than nothing? How does this shift the balance between considering “higher order concerns” and “lower order concerns”? How and why does—or does—this limit a tutor’s ability to ask questions?

McLean: I have problems with any strategies in a tutoring session based on age, gender, race, and any other markers, for the same reason that I have a problem with stereotypes in general: they just don’t fit right. I firmly believe that different students have different learning needs and strategies, and that it is the responsibility of a “good” tutor to try to adapt to those needs. On the other hand, all that adaptation takes time, a precious commodity for many students, “traditional” and “non-traditional.” Is it better to “waste time” adapting, or to make a few quick assumptions and get on with the session?

I have tutored many students, and few of them use the same approaches. While some students need to talk to me about their papers, working the problems out verbally, others need to diagram their thesis statements in little boxes on the back of their drafts. Finding these strategies can be a hit-and-miss approach: I often try two or three approaches before settling on one that seems to work for the student. Most of the time, I feel comfortable with this approach. Spending time with a student equates concern for their work, and my sessions tend to be long. In tutoring “non-traditional” students, I often find myself using different approaches. While I might tell a younger student that they need to come in a bit earlier the next time around, I would feel very uncomfortable doing this in a session with an older student. I find myself too intimidated by age and respect to “chide” “non-traditional” students about deadlines and responsibility; it feels somewhat akin to reminding my grandmother to wear her coat and hat before she goes outside. Furthermore, instead of using a combination of directive and nondirective strategies, I tend to be directive much of the time with older students, due to time constraints and other “grown-up” issues. When a student comes in and appears pressed for time, however, I find myself unconsciously tensing. Older students especially have this effect: somehow their time seems more precious, their priorities more important. Every time the student glances at the clock, I silently berate myself for not being more concise, more efficient. Having my own children in daycare only compounds this problem: I think of the money it costs for a student to sit at a table listening to me ramble on and on about thesis statements and parallelism.

Gardner: A slippery slope: where do you draw the line between adapting to students’ needs and falling into ethical relativism? Or do you? (i.e., is my word “falling” ill advised?)

McLean: While I’m convinced that there is a set of ethics somewhere behind my tutoring, I’m not always able to easily articulate them. That said, I think that there are some clear-cut ethical boundaries that I would never cross: criticizing a student’s paper on the basis of cultural differences, for example, or using humor as a means of belittling a student. But those are in fact few. I don’t see a lot of “nevers” in tutoring, mostly because I think it limits us. We need to keep our possibilities open; while some students work best with a very hands-off approach, I find that I have actually needed to take the pencil away (gasp!) when students try to dictate my words to them into their paper, or, more simply, when I feel that they need to think more before writing their thoughts down. What works for one student very often doesn’t work for another.

Lyman: We can’t move Mount Olympus in a single session—even a lengthy one—and a harried student who is pressed for time is not a likely candidate for hardcore restructuring.
work. Perhaps a way to deal with a student like Bea is to encourage her to make regular, brief appointments. Such a routine could accomplish two things: it may give the tutor a clearer sense of what the student’s goals are, and it may send regular positive messages—confirmed signs of progress—to the student who may already be grappling with the real or imagined stigma of being branded as “different.”

Rather than capitulating to the notion that college students fall under the two umbrellas of “traditional” and “non-traditional,” after several semesters of tutoring, I tend to see more obvious “types” of students, although again there are numerous gradations and shadings and nuances. The students I have encountered have either appeared to be motivated or to be going through the motions. If a student truly wants to improve his or her writing, s/he will find time to return to the Writing Center to work steadily. Revision is, after all, an on-going process.

**Gardner:** But you make establishing a routine sound so easy. . . .

**Lyman:** I might have bristled initially at a tutor telling me that if I truly wanted to improve, I’d find the time—especially if my schedule was terribly hectic. But I have the sneaking suspicion that eventually I’d have to believe this as truth. I was raised by a WW II-generation mother who taught me early on and modeled throughout my life that the only way to achieve was to work hard and stay on task. No making excuses. I’d resign myself to stealing extra moments—wherever I could find them—to do whatever it takes. And there are ways of making a brief amount of time very productive. . . .

**Ethics of mission**

**Gardner:** Pemberton and several other folks have repeatedly and usefully reminded us that mission and context shape responses to ethical questions—that, at times, some carefully contextualized relativism may be healthy. Our institution’s mission might be perceived as conflicted: bring “non-traditional” students into the fold, but be tough, tough, tough (ironically, while we watch universities across the nation devalue developmental measures and watch students—especially non-trads—see such help as punitive). How much do I bend my practice, which, like that of the presenters Hawthorne describes is often influenced by Stephen North’s work and especially by Jeff Brooks’s minimalism (1)? Should I be the kind of tutor Bea seems to want—quick, directive, Mr. Fix-It—in hopes that there will be a next visit where we can do what the ethics literature and training manuals tell us we should? Is this for the greater good?

Just what does “bring into the fold” mean for non-trads—and is this a good thing to do? I’m thinking especially of Marilyn Cooper’s call for tutors to help students create “really useful knowledge”—and to “critique the institutional structure of writing instruction in college” (98). While I’m a bit skeptical about her claim that “students and tutors who are outside of mainstream culture are usually more aware of the way language coerces them, but all students know how institutions coerce them in writing classes” (102), I’m thinking that Bea has been trying to be an agent for a long time. I’m thinking that her agency, like our own, is limited and exceedingly complex, that maybe she doesn’t want to be liberated right now (and I’m not being sarcastic or flip here; I take Cooper’s approach very seriously), that maybe being an agent doesn’t always mean being evolutionary. I’m thinking that, like some of Ira Shor’s savvy students, she’s picking her battles. Why—and/or how—should I push her to fight today, now—more than she is?

**McLean:** As I said earlier, I believe that strategies based on age, race, gender, or other such characteristics are unethical. I think that tutors, as well as anyone else, should struggle to avoid stereotyping students as such. However, I do believe that students need individual strategies adapted to their needs. What this implies for the tutor is that we should consider using a holistic approach to tutoring, considering other aspects of a student’s life while helping them with a paper. Our writing center mission is to improve writers, not just their writing, and I think we need to adapt this idea the best we can to every student. While Bea and others like her may have limited time, there are certainly ways to work within those boundaries. Instead of working for long periods of time on five different issues, perhaps Bea could work on the one issue that seems most pressing. The tutor could also point Bea to resources she could use at home to improve her writing. If she has access to the technology, Bea could even take advantage of online tutoring. There are many options for her to use, not all of which are directive, “quick-fix” solutions. We may not improve Bea’s writing by leaps, and it may be a slow and arduous process, but by small increments she may develop into a more effective writer.

Theory is always easier than practice, and it isn’t always easy tutoring “non-traditional” students, regardless of the issues. But who said tutoring was supposed to be easy at all? We have to deal daily with students facing time constraints, learning disabilities, language barriers, and a myriad of other pressures. I believe we have a responsibility to give each person the same attention, the same careful thought we give all. In short, I don’t think our mission of improving writers should change based on age and “non-traditional” status; I think we should continue to look at the individual.

**Gardner:** How would/do you encourage the “slow and arduous process” you mention above?

**McLean:** I think that perhaps the most important step we as tutors can take is recognizing that writing is a
painless process, often more so for the students we tutor than for ourselves. It helps me to have other classes I struggle in; the difficulties I face remind me that each student has his/her strengths and weaknesses. Closely tied to that, I think it’s very important to introduce new material slowly. We need to take steps by step and try not to overwhelm the student who is already pressed for time. Perhaps most importantly, though, is the patience and encouragement we can give such students. Knowing that the first small step they’ve taken is one headed in the right direction can make more difference than we often realize.

Lyman: When I was taking our course on tutoring writing, I remember that many of our classroom discussions focused on the parameters of what constituted a successful session; the general consensus seemed to be that any session where one goal was accomplished—large or small—was a good session. One of my chief worries as a fledgling tutor was the issue of legitimacy: just because I was a fairly strong writer, did this somehow equip me with the ability to share this strength, to communicate my passion for language with others? Wouldn’t any prospective student, older or younger, who came to the Writing Center for assistance quickly be able to spot me as a fraud?

My instructor in the course was instrumental in allaying my fears by reassuring us that communication was the key in being a viable tutor. Tutors didn’t have to know all of the answers. It was even OK to admit this. Peer tutoring is theoretically a reciprocal process; often a session teaches a tutor as much or more than it informs the tutee. The more experienced I’ve become as a tutor, the less I fear the vast gray areas of “unknowing”; I’m not afraid to admit when I don’t automatically know how to answer a question and say, “Gee, let’s see if we can figure it out together.”

I think that it’s normal for all new tutors to experience anxiety. So what if a tutor is a capable writer—does this somehow qualify him/her to be an effective tutor? I can see in retrospect that I had some unrealistic expectations when I started tutoring—maybe I’d hoped that I could magically make an individual more proficient all at once. But I gradually came to understand that each and every session was unique—different students, different needs, different concerns, etc. Legitimacy was something that came with experience—one tutoring interaction after another, each time making some difference, each time moving a student—“traditional,” “non-traditional,” other—closer to a goal.

Eric Gardner, Cynthia Lyman, and Kambria McLean
Saginaw Valley State University
University Center, MI

Works Cited


Hawthorne, Joan. “‘We Don’t Proofread Here’: Re-visioning the Writing Center to Better Meet Student Needs.” Writing Lab Newsletter 23.8 (April 1999): 1-7.


Nominations for IWCA Executive Board

Elections for at-large representatives to the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) will be held in June. Positions are for two years, beginning in November 2002. Nominees should plan to attend meetings at the IWCA, CCCC, and NCTE conferences, and should send a brief (200 word) biography by April 1 to Leigh Ryan at LR22@umail.umd.edu or The Writing Center, 0125 Taliaferro Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.

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