
The Politics of Tutoring: Feminism Within the Patriarchy

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And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you.
... I know why you haven't written... Because writing is at once
too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great—that is for
“great men”; and it's “silly”... Write, let no one hold you back, let
nothing stop you... (246)

Hélène Cixous

Feminist rhetoric has been described as very different from the traditional, patriarchal discourse of the academy. And although Hélène Cixous asserts in “The Laugh of the Medusa” that “it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing;” (253) for doing so would encode it, stifle it, in a masculinist framework, she does admit that we can “give form to its movement” (253) as we approximate its “near and distant byways” (253). The characteristics of this rhetoric have been variously described as its vibrancy, its personal voice, its sensuousness and open-endedness, set in striking contrast to the linear, objective, abstract, tightly argued prose of the academy. In “The Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric,” [Thomas J. Farrell describes the differences this way: “The female mode seems at times to obfuscate the boundary between the self of the author and the subject of the discourse, as well as between the self and the audience, whereas the male mode tends to accentuate such boundaries” (910). A dichotomy similar to that between feminist and patriarchal rhetoric can be seen in much current scholarship on feminist pedagogy.

In a recent volume of the *NWSA Journal*, Amy Shapiro describes a model for the feminist classroom, one based not on the traditional paradigm of knowledge as power, but on understanding as power. With this model, the classroom becomes not an arena of confrontation and debate focused on winners who “know” more than losers, but a place for conversation among equals. Students come to realize that they have authority, that they can learn from each other, and that through their conversations they can shape the knowledge of the discourse. Of the teacher's role in this conversation, Shapiro says that she “becomes a model in the sense that she must be the ultimate learner. Her role is to integrate and assist the students in articulating the texts to themselves and each other” (79). The goal of this pedagogy is “to liberate the tortured voice” (Juncker 428) imprisoned in what Verena Andermatt calls the “phallogocentric systems of representation” (39). Our students, says Cixous, need to write themselves.

The difficulty with these simple constructs is, of course, that in being simple constructs they are, albeit tempting, by and large misleading. In constructing these categories, our aim is to blur differences, and to focus on commonalities, on what makes up the essence or foundation of feminism and the patriarchy. Attempting to use these constructs to describe a dynamic interaction is tricky stuff. Those of us who consider ourselves academic feminists—whether we are male or female—do not choose feminism *or* the patriarchy, so much as we do at all times situate our feminism *within* a deep-seated patriarchal academy. When our feminist values of community and equality find some space within the power of the patriarchy, the result is not an Aristotelian either/or but a complex web of conflict. Nancy Sommers has recently said that “these either/or ways of seeing exclude life... by pushing us to safe positions, to what is known. They are safe positions that exclude each other and don't allow for any ambiguity, uncertainty” (29). She suggests that we look at the juncture of either *and/or*.

For those of us who teach writing, whether in the classroom or in a writing center, the conflicts that result at the boundary between feminist rhetoric and pedagogy and the patriarchal values of the academy are manifested in our conversations with student writers. These conversations are dynamic, and as such are fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity. As Nancy Schriedewind asserts, in these conversations students learn at least as much from our practices, what she calls the “hidden curriculum” (170) as they do from our theories. In order to determine if our “hidden curriculum” suggests feminist values, Schriedewind suggests five process goals against which we can measure our interactions with students. These are the development of an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and community; shared leadership;

a cooperative structure; the integration of cognitive and affective learning; and action. Because I recognize that the constructs of “feminist” and “patriarchal” are more points on a continuum than discrete categories, I believe these process goals can provide a useful framework for describing the multiple conflicts that result when one writing center tutor attempts to teach what she believes to be feminist pedagogy within the patriarchal system of the academy. I think these criteria are useful for two reasons: First, they are indicative of what I believe characterizes tutoring at its best. Feminist rhetoric and pedagogy and the “idea of a writing center” (North) have never been very far apart in my mind. Both feminist and writing center commentators advocate teaching methods that are non-hierarchical, cooperative, interactive ventures between students and tutors talking about issues grounded in the students’ own experience. They are, above all, conversations between equals in which knowledge is constructed, not transmitted. The second—and most important—reason that I use these criteria is that they are synonymous with what this tutor thinks she is doing when teaching feminist values to her students.

The conference I am considering is one of eight conferences between the same tutor and student that I observed and audiotaped over the course of a semester. My reason for doing this, and for conducting post-conference interviews with the tutor, was not only to learn more about what it is we do when we talk to students about their writing, but also to see if what tutors think they do when they tutor bears any resemblance to my interpretation. The participants in this conference were a junior English major and a graduate student who has just passed the qualifying exams for her doctorate. The student is working on a revision of a paper on Hemingway’s short story, “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife.” The student’s teacher, who was also the tutor’s doctoral examiner, has read and commented on the draft and is giving the student the opportunity to rewrite it. The student, the tutor, and the teacher are all women; both the tutor and the teacher identify themselves as feminists. In a post-conference interview with me, the tutor speaks of many layers of conflict in her interactions with this student. These can be identified broadly as conflicts between feminist and patriarchal pedagogy and rhetoric. On the level of rhetoric, the tutor says that a large part of what she tries to do with undergraduates involves teaching feminist values. She says that she encourages students to think and write clearly, in their own voices. She admits, however, the conflict that doing so causes her: Although she labels herself a feminist and says she believes in teaching according to feminist practice, she thinks that the student’s success—which she equates with giving the teacher the traditional thesis-and-support format she wants—is her

prime responsibility. For this tutor, there is a conflict between teaching feminist rhetoric and ensuring the student’s academic success. Negotiating between these two is no easy task for her.

On the level of feminist pedagogy, the issue is one of power. Negotiating the uses of power is even more complex than the issue of rhetoric. bell hooks says that as feminist teachers one of the issues we need to contend with is that of using power without dominating and coercing our students (52). This is just the issue this tutor is struggling with. She says that one of her problems in teaching and tutoring in the past has been that she didn’t “know how to have authority.” She says, “I didn’t know how to have control. I felt powerless.” When she was able to convince herself that she had some authority, she says, “I felt better because then there wasn’t any resistance from the students.” She overcame these feelings of powerlessness not by confronting them, but by ignoring them.

These two levels of conflict are very real for this tutor: “I try to find out where the student is, and what they want. I ask, ‘What do you like about it [the paper]?’ I’m afraid however, that a lot of times I take over. If I see something that’s disorganized or lacks connection, I want to do that for students. I pick out the problems. I guide it. The more problems I see, the more there’s the danger of my taking over.” The power of the patriarchy, the power of what the tutor perceives to be academic success, coupled with her tendency to subvert conflict, overwhelms her goals of feminist practice. As she tries to negotiate between the two, she chooses an uneasy alliance: In teaching the student what she considers to be the “correct” interpretation in the “correct” thesis-and-support format, her methodology is clearly that of the patriarchy; the interpretation, however, is a feminist reading of the text.

The result for the student is little more than confusion. Her situation in this patriarchal system results not in the liberation of an imprisoned voice, but in deafening silence and alienation. This student, far from learning to “write herself,” learns instead just how far her self is from the discourse of the academy. Instead of seeing herself in relation to others, she is hurled headlong into the realization of her otherness. Toril Moi claims that no matter what it is we think or say we do, in our practices we find our politics (xiii). This is certainly true in this instance as the following excerpt illustrates.

Note on the text:

S: Student
T: Tutor
...: Words omitted

... : More than one line of text omitted

< > : Other person speaks but without taking a turn

S: Did you pass?

T: Yes, thank you very much.

S: Oh, congratulations!

T: You've been sending me all sorts of support during my exams. . . . So now what are you doing?

S: Ok, we read the short story "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife." Our duty was to either describe the doctor . . . or the wife. <Uhhuh> And I chose to describe the doctor.

T: [Reads the paper and the teacher's comments.]

S: Oh, but I wish you wouldn't go by her [the teacher's] notes. I wish you'd go by your own.

T: I like this. [She reads:] "Now as far as eye teeth is concerned, I don't know whether this combo really exists in American lingo or whether it was just said out of exasperation." [Both laugh] I just love that little, your kind of expressing your own exasperation. Ok . . . um, you have a real clear attitude toward this doctor, right? <Right> And where is it that you say that all together? Where have you, is there a place, any place in the paper, where you kind of summarize your feelings about the doctor?

S: I think right at the beginning. [She reads:] "He's a typical bourgeoisie. The doctor seems to be conniving, selfish, a penny pincher, demanding respect from others, but facing up to no one, not even his wife."

T: Good. . . .

S: As I was reading the story, I got the sense that they were trying to uh, prove manhood . . . I'm not sure. I didn't have that problem.

T: This is interesting because you're suggesting that one of the issues in this story sounds like it's a test of manhood. . . . Oh, that's interesting. It sounds to me like you've landed on something that Hemingway's really trying to use to say something.

S: I couldn't figure out what it was though. It's like a puzzle. I don't know.

T: That sounds to me like an interesting thesis, especially given Hemingway's general themes . . . I mean, you're probably right. . . . Um, ok, do you

think that you have in here any place . . . uh, the fact that what goes on between . . . Henry and Dick is a test of manhood?

S: I was going to do it . . . and I didn't do it because I thought, how am I going to prove that? Maybe I can just take a lot of quotes. I don't know.

T: Um, well, you already mentioned a couple of things. Um, how the doctor turns red . . . and how Dick walks out on him. . . . Since you mentioned that, I think it's important to trust that it has something to do with this issue of manhood . . . Um, anything else that leads you to think that this is a test of manhood besides the confrontation between the two men? Um, up here you say his profession gives him status and makes him arrogant. . . . All right, I want to suggest to you that this is your thesis. . . . I want to hear some more things about why you think that this story is essentially a test of manhood. . . . So, if this is the thesis . . . what would your three main points be? . . . Ok, A) He's not intimidated and B) He knows what he's worth. What's the next thing you're going to do according to your thesis here?

S: [Silence]

T: What happens when I ask you these questions?

S: I'm trying to think of an answer—really hard!

T: Yeah, you go, "Ugh. I don't know." But . . . you know this stuff.

S: Yeah.

T: Somehow when I ask you questions, it freezes you, I think. Do you think that's possible?

S: I'm trying too hard for the answer or something. I don't know.

T: I think you have given me a whole lot of information around which I could organize your paper, given this thesis, and all I'm trying to help you do is see how you could take the information you have and all you need to do is trust your information enough to give your own explanation of how this point illustrates my main thesis. That's what I want you to be able to see.

S: I don't know. I'm really afraid of being wrong.

T: I agree. So at least in here, feel like, I can risk it. Now, how does this point support this thesis?

At the beginning of the conference, the two participants exhibit signs of the sense of respect, trust, and community that Schriedewind has identified

as characteristic of feminist pedagogy. The student knows that the tutor has just taken her qualifying examinations and starts the conference by asking the tutor if she has passed. When she learns that the tutor has passed, she seems genuinely happy. The tutor in turn acknowledges that the student has given her “all sorts of support” as she was taking her exams. These two have obviously shared personal information, an indication that they are operating out of a sense of mutual respect and trust. The relationship between the tutor and student is contrasted with the student’s relationship with her teacher, evident when she tells the tutor not to pay any attention to the teacher’s comments on her draft. She says, “I wish you wouldn’t go by her notes. I wish you’d go by your own.”

In the first substantive comment on the student’s paper, the tutor praises her for what she sees as a particularly unique interpretation of a line from the story. She says, “I just love... your expressing your own exasperation there.” At this, they both laugh. The first few minutes then, read like a promise of Schniedewind’s first four process goals. They not only signal the sense of mutual respect, trust, and community that Schniedewind recommends, but are an explicit example of both her and Cixous’ call for a new affective order, one that will “change the overly rational premises of male-dominated social relations and institutions” and will “incorporate priorities appreciative of human needs and feelings” while at the same time strengthening intellectual abilities, “so long suppressed by those same sexist norms and institutions” (Schniedewind 176). Further, the tutor’s praise of the student’s particular reading of the line suggests that perhaps the product of the conference will be characterized by the personal voice called for by feminist rhetoric. From the opening exchange, it seems that the leadership will be shared and the decision-making participatory in constructing a cooperative structure.

However, this does not happen. If we look at the tutor’s post-conference remarks about this praise for the student, we see that it is not what it seems. When asked about the meaning of this line, the tutor says, “She [the student] didn’t understand this very well. She’s not using her sources well. She’s using all sorts of references but not in a clear way. I wanted her to talk about the significance of the quote.” The tutor goes on to say that she thought “the student was exasperated” because she didn’t understand what she was saying. “Her intelligence,” the tutor said, “is embedded in confusion.” For Margot Adair and Sharon Howell, people dependent on those in power cannot afford to alienate them: “They end up thinking one thing and saying another” (221). Realizing the power of the student’s teacher over both of them and uncomfortable with her own power over the student, this is what happens to this tutor. When the tutor says to the student, “I just love... your expressing

your own exasperation here” what she is thinking is “Boy, are you confused!” In thinking one thing and saying another, the tutor is subverting the conflict she feels. This initial subversion changes to confrontation in the next exchange.

According to Amy Shapiro, one of the ways that a sense of community is formed is through the types of questions that the teacher/tutor asks. Community breaks down when individuals ask “preset questions, questions that they already know the answers to, questions designed not to build trust and share understandings, but to challenge and exhibit power” (70). This is what the tutor does here. After taking a few minutes to read the paper, she asks her first substantive question about the text: “Um, you have a real clear attitude about this doctor, right? <Right> And where is it that you say all that together? Where have you, is there a place, any place in the paper where you kind of summarize your feelings about the doctor?” The tutor does not ask the student to articulate her attitude, but instead asks a simple yes/no question of where in the paper the student has this statement. Since the tutor has just finished reading the text, we can assume that it is a question she already knows the answer to.

This movement from personal conversation to subversion to confrontation is evidence of the conflict the tutor feels. It is fine to talk to students as equals, to share information and to build the sense of trust and respect called for with feminist pedagogy as long as the topic is a personal one; when the topic shifts to the work on the student’s paper, the pedagogy shifts to an uneasy subversion and finally to the confrontation of the patriarchy. In this example, instead of talking as they have been and simply shifting topics, a strategy which might result in exploring the student’s attitude toward the doctor, the tutor sees it as her responsibility to locate the thesis. In doing this, she is subverting the possibility of shared leadership and community, and reinforcing the patriarchal notion that meaning not only resides in the text, but is, in this instance, already there.

Although the tutor may want to create a conversation between equals, and although she may want to establish an atmosphere of trust, her keen sense of responsibility to teach students to write in the “correct” format overwhelms her feminist values. The tutor holds on to the responsibility—and the power. The conflict that doing so causes is apparent in the tutor’s explanation of this line. She says, “I was trying to get her to explain, to say more about it, so I could get her to put it together in one statement. But I was trying to get her to do it indirectly. I was afraid if I asked, ‘What’s the thesis?’ she would shut up or back off.”

When the student answers the tutor's question saying, "I think right in the beginning," and then goes on to read her summary description of the doctor, the tutor says, "Good," praising her for the correct answer. The atmosphere has changed from one of mutual respect, trust and community to one of hierarchy. The tutor is saying one thing and meaning another; she is asking leading questions with the student trying to guess the answers. This exchange puts shared leadership, participatory decision-making, and cooperative structure very much in doubt.

As the conference progresses, this dynamic is intensified. A few minutes later the student mentions that in reading the story, she had the sense that it might have something to do with "proving manhood." As soon as the student mentions that she was considering this theme as a possibility, a possibility that she rejected when writing her first draft, the tutor begins trying to convince her that this is the right way to interpret the story: "This is interesting because you're suggesting that one of the issues in this story sounds like it's a test of manhood . . . That's interesting. It sounds to me like you've landed on something that Hemingway's really trying to use to say something . . ." The topic has shifted here from what the tutor believes to be the "correct" format, to what she believes to be the "correct" interpretation. The student's uncertainty and alienation from this theme are not only evident when she says, "I'm not sure. I didn't have that problem" but in her response: "I couldn't figure out what it was though. It's like a puzzle. I, I don't know." To this, the tutor responds, "That sounds to me like an interesting thesis, especially given Hemingway's general themes. . . . Um, ok, do you think that you have in here any place, the fact that what goes on between Henry and Dick is a test of manhood?" In her determination to teach this feminist interpretation, the tutor is, for the most part, leaving the student out of the interaction. Again, the form of the question—a yes/no location one instead of a probing one—reinforces the tutor's fervency and prevents any genuine sharing of power.

Instead of helping the student to interpret the story in a way she feels comfortable with, a way that has some connection to her own life and experience, the tutor increases the student's alienation by encouraging her to read the story through this lens. In doing this, she is not only *not* strengthening the student's intellectual abilities but she is preventing any sort of intellectual tension that could lead to cognitive growth. Further, instead of recognizing the power of the affective response the student has had to this reading, the tutor ignores it, telling her essentially that both her cognitive and affective reactions are wrong. In "Style as Politics: A Feminist Approach to

the Teaching of Writing," Pamela Annas argues that we need to help our students overcome their alienation from language, their texts, their subjects, and themselves, and convince them that what they have to say is important and that they have an audience who will listen (361). This tutor, no matter how well meaning, is doing just the opposite.

In the student's response there is a conflict between her unwillingness to pursue this theme and her continuing trust and desire to please the tutor. It seems reasonable to expect that thoughts of a good grade also linger. She says, "I was going to do it . . . and I didn't do it because I thought, how am I going to prove that? Maybe I can just take a lot of quotes. I don't know." The tutor, firm in her resolve, suggests this theme once again: "Ok, well . . . I want to hear some more things about why you think that this story is essentially a test of manhood." Interestingly, the student has never said that she thinks the story is "essentially a test of manhood." This is what the tutor thinks, not the student. "Participatory decision-making" is taking a back seat to the "hierarchical authority" of the tutor. There is no evidence of shared leadership. The tutor is writing a paper based on what she considers to be the correct reading of the text and on what she thinks will get the student a good grade. She is not operating according to feminist pedagogy. In fact, she is simply further inculcating the masculinist values of the academy.

When asked about this exchange, the tutor comes to a realization. She says, "I just wrote the paper for her. I put it together. I didn't get her to put it together. And that's where things break down. She doesn't know what I'm talking about." The conflict between the tutor wanting to teach feminist values, wanting to encourage the student's own voice, wanting shared leadership and a cooperative goal structure—and wanting the student to succeed academically—remains in the realm of the tutor's subjectivity. The conflict is silenced. Because of this, it is not until the tutor hears herself on tape that she realizes what she is doing.

As the conference progresses, the movement away from an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect and toward one of hierarchy and domination becomes more evident both in the tutor's insistence on a thesis-support format for the paper and in the conversational patterns she uses to achieve that end. The tutor says: "So, if this [proving manhood] is the thesis . . . what would your three main points be?" She is reaching the student the traditional five-paragraph theme, with an emphasis on the objective, linear values of the patriarchy. The absence of shared leadership and participatory decision-making is evident when the tutor then answers her own question with two characteristics that will prove the thesis she is suggesting: "A) He's not intimidated; and B) He knows what he's worth." The tutor ends this

exchange with a leading question, "All right, what's the next thing you're going to do according to your thesis here?" Twice more in the conference the tutor uses this conversational pattern of asking and answering her own questions. She says, "Do you have any place in here the fact that what goes on between Henry and Dick is a test of manhood?" When the student responds that, although she was thinking about that theme, she rejected it when she wrote the draft, the tutor answers the question for her. "Well," she says, "you already mentioned a couple of things. Um, how the doctor turns red . . . and how Dick walks out on him . . ." Later on she says, "Ok, well, I want to hear some more things about why you think this story is essentially a test of manhood . . . Um, just off the top of your head, what are some of the other ways in which you think this is . . . a contest about manhood? You talk about Dick chewing the tobacco and spitting." Here she asks one question, does not wait for the student's response before rephrasing it and finally answers it herself. Later, she asks, "Um, anything else that leads you to think that this is . . . a test of manhood besides the confrontation between the two men? Um, up here you say . . . his profession gives him status and makes him arrogant."

In talking about this exchange, the tutor says, "I'm trying to show her how to develop it. I'm also doing all of the writing for her. The problem is I don't think she understands. What she's capable of isn't enough. I kept feeling that I wasn't reaching her, so I gave her more." What the tutor is doing is not authorizing this student's voice, but silencing it.

Faced with the conflict of trying to teach feminist values within a patriarchal system, and given the power that the patriarchy asserts over both her and the student, this tutor aligns herself with the patriarchy, the only concession to feminist practices being the interpretation of the text. In doing this, she assumes the role of the oppressor: Her strategies do, for the most part, undermine any hope of establishing a cooperative goal structure for the conference, a structure that "an individual can complete . . . successfully if, and only if, all others with whom she is linked do otherwise" (174). In taking control of the text and the conversation, the tutor is essentially writing the paper and talking to and for herself. There is little indication that the student will be able to complete successfully what the tutor intends for her. Toward the end of the conference, the tutor says, "You have given me a whole lot of information around which I could organize your paper, given this thesis." Given the interaction thus far, this seems like a safe bet: The tutor could indeed write this paper. The problem is that the student cannot.

In the last minutes of the conference, the tutor finally notices that she has been engaged in a monologue for the better part of an hour. She has been so

determined to write this paper according to her interpretation that she has hardly noticed the student's inactivity. When she asks the student a direct question of how a particular idea links to this thesis, the student's response is a full minute of silence. At this, the tutor moves into meta-conferencing, asking the student, "What happens when I ask you these questions?" The student responds, "I try to think of an answer—really hard." This response is not surprising given that the tutor has spent a good deal of time and energy teaching her that there is indeed a right answer—one the tutor knows and the student needs to guess. When the tutor continues, asking her why she "freezes," the student admits that she is "really afraid of being wrong." One of the things this tutor has achieved is to reinforce this fear. Perhaps the most ironic comment is when she says to the student, "I agree, but at least in here, feel like I can risk it." This, after saying to the student, "Trust your information . . . of how this point illustrates *my* main thesis." I have to believe that the tutor is genuine in her wish that the student take risks. Unfortunately, the tutor is so dependent on the power of the academy that she cannot afford to risk alienation either for herself or for the student.

The writing conference seems the ideal location for Schniedewind's assertion that when individuals have "opportunities to come to know each other as people, speak honestly, take risks, and support each other . . . feminist values of community, communication, equality, and mutual nurturance are reinforced" (171). Throughout this conference, however, this does not happen. These two have the opportunity to come to know each other as people through a conversation about writing. But they do not. The tutor is caught between the conflict of wanting to teach feminist values but ever-mindful of the power structure in which she is working, doing so with the "correct" interpretation and in the "correct" form for the paper. In trying to persuade the student of these things, she is reinforcing the positivistic, patriarchal value that there is a "correct" reading, that she knows what that reading is, and that her job as a tutor is to teach this reading to this student. There is no evidence of "equality" between these conversants; there is no "mutual nurturance." Further, there is little evidence of participatory decision-making, shared leadership, or a cooperative goal structure. Indeed, there is little evidence that the student is considered at all. The tutor is clearly in control. She talks more than the student does and sets the agenda for what gets talked about, when, and for how long. In taking control of both the text and the conversation, she is stifling both the student's cognitive and affective capabilities. In insisting on a reading that the student has said she feels alienated from, she is reinforcing the values of hierarchy and objectivity, while teaching the student to ignore her emotional responses. This is not only not good feminist pedagogy; this is not good tutoring.

The main reason that this interaction is neither good feminist practice nor good tutoring is that it is not honest. According to Schriedewind and others who write of feminist pedagogy, our interactions with students ought to be conversations with equals, based on the students' own experience, taking place in an atmosphere of trust, respect, nurturance. It seems to me that most of us who teach writing would agree with this. But none of this is possible if the tutor is not honest about the conflicts she feels.

So where does this leave us? It seems to me that the answer lies in Schriedewind's fifth criteria—action. About this, she says, "As long as we live in a sexist society, feminism inevitably implies taking action to transform institutions and values" (178). For Nancy Sommers, this action is "encouragement." She says that with "enough encouragement," our students will be "empowered to serve the academy and accommodate it, not to write in the persona of Everystudent, but rather to write essays that will change the academy" (30). I want to suggest that our action needs to be more than encouragement. For academic feminists, our action requires that the political circumstances in which we write and talk to students be named. In naming, we create a space in which we can talk openly about the conflicts between feminism and the patriarchy. We can consider how and why different rhetorics and pedagogies come to be privileged and the implications of this privileging for how we both construct ourselves and are constructed by the institutions in which we work. With this naming, our students can be given the power and the responsibility to negotiate between feminism and the patriarchy, between writing vibrantly, sensuously, in their own voices and writing the tightly argued prose of the academy.

In the conference I have considered, the student is never given the power or the responsibility to make this choice. The tutor is so dependent on the patriarchy that she cannot afford to risk this naming. And because the conflicts are not named, they remain solely within the realm of the subjective, in this case, the tutor's head. The result for both the tutor and the student is an alienation from themselves. For the tutor, the result is that she thinks one thing and says another: Her interaction with this student is directly opposite from what she perceives it to be. Far from transforming this student's values or the values of a sexist academy, in not articulating the conflicts and the power struggles at work here, this tutor is simply reinforcing institutional norms of silence and obedience. The fact that she does this through the guise of a feminist interpretation of the story makes it all the more harmful.

For the student, the result is that at the end of the conference, she is far more alienated from language and from herself than when the conference

began. Ira Shor says that this alienation is the number one problem in education today, manifesting itself in our students' passivity and apathy. Whether we realize it or not, when we are silent about the conflicts we feel, we reinforce this apathy. No matter what we say, when our interactions with students are characterized by subversion and dominance, we are encouraging passivity and reinforcing alienation.

Hélène Cixous writes of the conflict between a world in which only "great men" write and a world in which all other writing is deemed "silly." Her call to "write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you" locates itself in the *and* between these two worlds. In negotiating between them, we need, above all, to be honest. We need to admit to ourselves and to our students the conflicts we feel when attempting to espouse feminist values within a patriarchal system, to admit the power inequities we live with, and to admit further that the dichotomization between feminist and patriarchal practices is a false one. Only if we confront these conflicts, only if we present our students with the options and the power to choose, will we be truly honest and will feminism—and good tutoring—have any chance at all.

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What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Our Metaphors: A Cultural Critique of Clinic, Lab, and Center

Peter Carino

My title evokes Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," a short story in which two couples talk and drink an afternoon away discussing various experiences and definitions of love, searching for the elusive signified that would fill the signifier and render the word and their lives meaningful. Ultimately, meaning eludes them, and the narrative appears to reach closure as they run out of the gin that has lubricated the conversation. But this closure is undone in the last line of the story when the first-person narrator hears everyone's heart beating and metaphorically identifies the sound as "the human noise we sat there making" (154).

The indeterminacy of Carver's story provides an apt metaphor for examining the ways we have attempted to define the writing center. Though we have not been drinking gin, the various attempts at definition in our literature can leave one dizzy. As Thomas Hemmeter argues, discourse on writing centers continually begins with gestures of self-definition: "It is as if each theorist must begin anew the process of awakening the slumbering writing center profession to the urgent need for self-creation" (36). In one sense, this is how it should be. From a post-structuralist perspective on language, we accept that definition is always already tenuous, for to define is to symbolize, to create metaphors, to be in language. Situated thus, one might arrive at a definition like that which Hemmeter constructs. Playing off Stephen North he writes, "The writing center is an idea—in language." Pushing a bit further, he concludes, "The writing center *is* our words, a linguistic phenomenon" (emphasis original, 44).

I do not advocate a naive return to an uncomplicated view of language, but to borrow a term from Stuart Hall, the "experiential 'thickness'" (58) we