

# Negotiating Voice in the Writing Center

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*Writing in academia often requires students to abandon their voice and adopt the discourse conventions of the academic community in order to successfully pass classes and socialize with peers. For students with language backgrounds other than that of their institution, this process can create conflict within their identity, as the voice shaped by their “home” language and the voice of the institution are competing against each other. In this clash, the writing center acts as a gateway for students—particularly multilingual students—to access academic discourse and minimize the amount of “errors” in their writing. The writing consultant thus occupies a position optimal for informing students who have cultural and linguistic differences between their “home” languages and academic discourse. Given this ability to bridge the distance between the two communities, it is necessary to explore the responsibility of the consultants in mitigating the loss of voice and identity.*

*In this paper, I draw upon my work as a Mānoa Writing Center consultant, as well as the scholarship of Gloria Anzaldúa, Andrea Lunsford, and John Trimbur, to explore the consultant’s responsibility in negotiating these clashing communities through collaborative practices. In applying these pedagogical methods, I hope to reframe the conversation around building alliances between multifaceted identities.*

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The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM) is a diverse campus, with students, faculty, and staff originating from “Hawai‘i, the U.S. mainland, and more than 100 countries around the world” (“Campus Diversity,” n.d.). As a service accessible to all, the UHM Writing Center and its consultants, or tutors, are tasked with working with this diverse student population to produce writing that satisfies the demands of the academic community. The UHM Writing Center appointment software database reveals that over this past academic year (8/24/17–

5/4/18) about sixty percent of the 1,976 appointments were booked by clients who did not identify English as their first language. With a large majority of appointments being made by multilingual students, it is critical to negotiate the client’s home language with the demands of academic discourse because of the conflict in identities this issue can spawn. As a consultant, one of my roles is to model this academic discourse for the student, allowing them access to the academic community. Due to this responsibility, the writing center is often per-



I am a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English and Psychology at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. This piece explores the intersection between theory and practice—particularly in balancing the client’s voice and identity with the writing conventions required by the academic discourse community. I hope to extend this conversation toward more informed tutoring practices centered on collaboration and community-building so as to foster alliances between multicultural identities.

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ceived by the client as a gateway to academic discourse; however, this impression conflicts with the consultant role in supporting writer's voice and identities, especially in cases where the writer does not identify English as their first language. To reconcile these competing communities, practices focused on collaboration and dissensus offer pathways toward building alliances, consolidating identities within and between individuals rather than isolating them.

Before continuing, it is necessary to define academic discourse and the process through which a student may be socialized into this particular type of community. While there is some dispute over disciplinary-specific academic discourse, for the purposes of this paper, the term "academic discourse" applies to the academic community as a whole. This academic discourse "refers to forms of oral and written language and communication—genres, registers, graphics, linguistic structures, interactional patterns—that are privileged, expected, cultivated, conventionalized, or ritualized" by the academic or professional communities (Duff, 2010, p. 175). In order to join the discourse community, language socialization is necessary. Language socialization is based on the theory that a person's understanding of language is developed "through interactions with others who are more proficient in the language and its cultural practices" (Duff, 2010, p. 172). The "experts" in the community inform "novices" of the "textual conventions, the expectations, the habits of mind, and methods of thought that allow one to operate in an academic conversation" (Flower, 1990). More specifically, joining the academic discourse community requires students to learn the "explicit and (or) implicit mentoring or evidence about normative, appropriate uses of the language, and of the worldviews, ideologies, values, and identities of community members" (Duff, 2010, p. 172). Thus, academic discourse socialization concerns the process through which students are informed of the culture, standards of success, and language of academic discourse by those deemed to be experts in the community, such as professors or faculty members of the academic institute and, to a lesser extent, consultants.

The process of academic discourse socialization reveals the complex culture and power dynamic between the student and teacher, especially when the student is multilingual. Discourses and their parameters for "correct usage" emerge from society and culture but are mainly determined by the institutes of authority (Foucault, 2001), such as the academic discourse community. As an expert in the academic community, the teacher or professor is tasked with the role of informing the student of the academic conventions that are necessary to succeed in the community. In the process of socialization, however, the student is forced to learn a new discourse, and thus a new identity. A person's ideologies, culture, values, and success are all socially constructed by the language and rhetoric used in a particular community. In this sense, language is identity (Anzaldúa, 2001). Assuming the new identity introduced by the academic discourse community becomes a larger hurdle

for the multilingual student who does not speak English as their first language. The multilingual student, for example, may be introduced to alternative "discourses of (showing) respect (and self-control, decorum) to teachers, to one another, and to the subject matter itself" that contrasts with the values and discourses shaped by their home language (Duff, 2010, p. 173). While the student has the option to reject these newly introduced ideologies, in order to integrate with the community and succeed both academically and socially, the student "must learn the rules—or learn how to bend the rules" (Borg, 2003; Duff, 2010, p. 180). This requirement implies that there is an inherent hierarchical power structure and that the student's home language(s), or their voice, may not be recognized in an academic paper. Academic discourse socialization overhauls the multilingual student's languages and voice, implicating the teacher's role as a gatekeeper to the academic community and their authority over the student.

To navigate this discrepancy in power, the consultant can act as a mediator for multilingual students as they occupy a position that is between a student and teacher. While the consultant may be a student and therefore seen as a novice, they also have experience with maneuvering academic discourse and "know how to produce activities that will grant them recognition by the official" (Mozafari, 2009, p. 54). Despite this position of being slightly higher than the student in the "academic ladder," the consultant is still below the teacher's position, as they are not responsible for creating and grading assignments or enforcing rules (Mozafari, 2009). In other words, consultants have access to the discourse that is recognized by the academic society, but they do not have the same power that this community can exert on the student body. Muriel Harris (1995) also identifies this liminal relationship; in "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers need Writing Tutors," she observes that the consultant acts as the "middle person," in that they "[inhabit] a world somewhere between teacher and student" (p. 27–28). As the person occupying this middle space, the consultant's role is to translate the teacher's language into the student's language. Not only would the tutor be providing "propositional knowledge," which includes "knowledge of various academic genres of writing, knowledge of rhetorical structures, or knowledge of cultural variations in rhetorical values that perplex international students," they would also "collaborate with students as they acquire the practical knowledge they [the students] need" (p. 37). In this sense, writing centers can be viewed as a gateway between the student's discourse and academic discourse that is typically seen amongst teachers and professors.

Occupying this middle space becomes increasingly vital when confronting the cultural and linguistic differences between monolingual English students and multilingual students. Due to the linguistic and rhetorical differences innate in students that do not identify English as their first language, multilingual students struggle with accessing the appropriate academic discourse necessary for success in the community.

Often, these students “are painfully aware of their errors, but are not sure or simply do not know how to fix them” (Myers, 2011, p. 29). In these situations, the consultant acts as a cultural informant, “informing” these students about the linguistic preferences of English that they would not have access to individually (Cogie, Strain, & Lorinskas, 1999). Cameron Mozafari (2009) expands on this idea through scaffolding on Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of a third space. This space sits between the “unofficial body of knowledge (such as background knowledge stemming from a different culture)” and the “official and legitimized body of knowledge (such as that of academia)” (p. 50). By collaborating with the consultant, the multilingual student would learn to balance this dynamic and negotiate their identity in the academic discourse community. Moreover, engaging in this process of mediation between the academic discourse community and the student’s community further builds upon the client’s view of the writing center as a gateway to academic discourse, or a gateway to success.

This interpreter position between the teacher and the student grants the consultant the opportunity to meet the writer’s needs at a more personalized level. As consultants tend to also occupy the role of the students and do not have the power of creating and grading assignments, clients are less intimidated (Harris, 1995). In these one-on-one settings, the consultant is able to observe patterns of rhetorical and linguistic preferences that are particular to the multilingual student. Once these patterns are recognized, consultants can model the necessary language, argumentative structure, or any other necessary aspects of academic discourse that the student needs to succeed. For example, one of my clients requested help with writing a business memo and other homework assignments. One of the assignments was to revise an email he had previously submitted. On this paper, the professor had marked areas that had organizational or wording issues. Despite the markings, my client had trouble finding a way to revise the areas that the teacher deemed erroneous. In this case, I acted as an interpreter. In one area where the professor commented to “make the wording more direct,” I modeled an example of a sentence that limited the number of infinitives, which was one rhetorical preference he struggled with. After modeling, my client was able to recognize other areas that were “too wordy” (Journal Entry, 2/27/18). Through this session, I was able to distinguish that one of the consultant’s roles is to act as an interpreter, and that this role promotes client-based sessions, not classroom-based lessons.

While this position as an interpreter is beneficial for uniquely supporting the client, the consultant’s role can be, and often is, misinterpreted by the clients as that of a proofreader or a grammar-fix-it shop employee. Of my 15 sessions, seven of my clients noted that their first language is not English. The majority of these sessions would begin with the client requesting “help” with proofreading and/or grammar (Journal Entries, 2/13/18–4/4/18). Through these experiences, I realized

that there is a disconnect between the client’s and consultant’s understanding of general terminology and the pedagogical responsibilities that a “tutoring” service provides. The consultant is informed by both the pedagogy and practices of tutoring, enabling them to distinguish between proofreading and revision. The client, however, may not have been informed about these distinctions. For instance, one client requested that I proofread her paper and check for grammatical errors. While reading through her paper, I noticed a few grammatical errors, but my main concern was with her content. I decided that the structure and clarity of the paper took precedence over grammatical errors that did not detract from her argument. If the client truly intended to only request proofreading services, she would have been resistant to these changes, but she instead took notes for later revisions. After making these notes, however, the client’s focus was immediately back to grammatical errors (Journal Entry, 5/1/18). This obsession with grammar is likely tied to general anxieties about their language skills, as being accepted into the academic community while fulfilling its standards of success requires the student to have control over an unfamiliar grammar system with minimum “error.”

These concerns about grammar and clarity in academic discourse emphasize one of the multilingual student’s constant battles with having multiple languages—conflicting identities. As a student attempting to join the academic community, the necessity of meeting the set expectations in order to be successful is a looming concern. In learning and using academic discourse, however, the student’s home language(s) and discourse communities may be excluded, leading to a loss of the writer’s original voice. On most occasions, the conflicting linguistic, rhetorical, and ideological preferences that arise from clashing discourse communities result in “internal strife.” Anzaldúa identifies that “internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness” (2001, p. 1597). The writers’ insecurities are linked to meeting the expectations of the academic discourse community, as well as to the confusion of learning a new language that introduces a new form of voice.

Diction, syntax, rhetorical and linguistic patterns, all are inherently tied to culture and identity construction; words symbolize emotions, cultural practices, and spiritual affects. One of my clients noted that she had difficulty translating many words from her first language, Tagalog, to English because it did not encapsulate the “same feelings” (Journal Entry, 2/13/18). The word “maarte,” for example, officially translates to “artful” or “artsy;” however, colloquially, it is used to “describe someone, especially a young woman, who can be nitpicky and by extension pretentious. It has a negative connotation, but not a very strong one” (“maarte,” n.d.). Although the word can be translated through English, its entire essence, including the strength of the connotation mentioned, cannot. This cultural and linguistic difference clarifies the difficulties in direct translations, complicating the negotiation of the writer’s voice when their “voice” is influenced by multiple languages and identities.

The consultant's position between the professor and the student has a rather influential role in addressing the insecurities of the client in their use of English. Multilingual clients who are not confident in their ability to control academic discourse often seek help at the Writing Center. As this place is perceived to be a gateway to academic discourse because of the consultant's role, these clients can become compliant with the changes suggested by the consultant. In one session, a client came in seeking "help" with grammar and proofreading. Occasionally, I would come across areas that were unclear due to wording, so I asked her, "What do you mean by this part here?" This question prompted a verbal discussion in which she was able to communicate and elaborate on her thoughts. To demonstrate that I was listening, I rephrased her words and then tried to confirm if I understood her. When I did so, however, rather than writing down what she told me, she wrote down what I had said. I prompted her to rephrase the sentences in her own words, thereby expressing her thoughts in her own voice, but she struggled with finding another way of phrasing her thoughts, despite having done so previously (Journal Entry, 5/1/18). While I was attempting to model the phrasing used in academic discourse, which is part of the responsibility I hold as a consultant, I was also overriding her voice. The client's insecurities related to her use of English, along with her desire to succeed in the academic community, led to a lack of resistance to academic discourse socialization and a loss of voice.

Although supporting the multilingual writer by providing them with a model of academic discourse is one of the consultant's main roles, this type of directive tutoring also highlights the consultant's responsibility for supporting the writer's voice. Muriel Harris and Tony Silva (1993) have identified in their article "Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options," that "[multilingual] students cannot easily come to some of the realizations that native speakers can as a result of tutorial questioning and collaboration" (p. 533). The multilingual writer who does not identify English as their first language does not have access to the same intuitive understanding of English, compared to the writer who has learned the language since birth. It is part of the tutor's role to provide the client with a way to access the rhetorical and linguistic preferences of English. In doing so, however, the consultant is socializing the student to academic discourse by overriding the multilingual writer's voice in the paper, thereby suppressing their identity.

A broader example of this socialization process is from one of my sessions on 5/1/18 in which my client misused or excluded articles, such as "a" or "the." The client expressed that Japanese "doesn't have articles," creating confusion of when to use an article or which type of article (definite or indefinite) to use (Journal Entry, 5/1/18). This concern is not particular to a single client; many of my other multilingual clients have also expressed similar difficulties. Patricia Duff (2010) cites an example of a Japanese doctoral student, Keiko, resisting this

grammatical difference by avoiding definite articles and thereby "[preserving] her identity and voice as a Japanese student" (p. 174). Still, this type of resistance is uncommon. Of all my clients, I have not encountered a student who was determined to maintain particular structures for the purposes of representing their mixed identities and voices. Instead, many of these multilingual writers are focused on "fixing" their grammatical errors to ensure their success in the academic community.

Not only as a consultant but as a student and a Japanese American, it is part of my responsibility to reconcile the conflicting voices present in writing. The academic discourse community being the dominant culture in this educational system requires the student to conform to its writing style in order to succeed, which may also be at odds with the student's voice. One of my responsibilities as a consultant is to provide an access-point for writers, which is particularly the case for multilingual speakers who do not identify English as their first language. I am to act both as the interpreter between the student and the teacher, and as the informer of culture, ideologies, linguistic and rhetorical preferences of academic discourse that these students may not have access to otherwise. In providing multilingual students with this discourse, however, I am introducing them to a new identity that may conflict with or even suppress their home language(s). Through her experiences as a Chicana-American woman, Gloria Anzaldúa was able to discern that since language is identity, the suppression of language is a suppression of identity—condemning a person's home language condemns the person's sense of self (2001). As a Japanese American, I am aware of the colliding cultural and ideological values that both of these societies possess. If I am to be a consultant that advocates for the writer's voice, I must also acknowledge my position as a writer with competing identities. Unfortunately, while the acknowledgment of my responsibilities as both a consultant and a writer are straightforward, determining a way to negotiate the writer's voice with the requirements of the academic writing style is still unclear.

In light of this complex relationship between the writer and the academic community, collaboration has the potential to mediate these conflicting voices and resist the suppression of the writer's individualistic voice and identity. Andrea Lunsford (2011) proposes the idea of turning the writing center into a collaborative environment in which everyone involved—writers, tutors, and teachers—rely on "one another to carry out common goals" that are unambiguous and "engage everyone fairly equally" (p. 71). In working towards this ideal, collaborative environment, individuals learn to work as a "negotiating group." Hierarchy and power no longer belong to a single individual but rather to the writing center as a whole. In other words, implementing collaboration into centers would challenge hierarchical issues, while presenting not only the advantage of consensus but also "dissensus and diversity" (p. 75).

John Trimbur (2003) in “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning” offers a similar view on collaboration and consensus, but he mainly focuses on the idea of finding “consensus in terms of conflict rather than agreement” (p. 468). The recognition of conflict establishes a platform for “unequal social order” and “asymmetrical relations of power in everyday life,” thus cultivating an environment where people of various backgrounds can work together despite their differences (Trimbur, 2003, p. 469). Accordingly, collaboration, as defined by Lunsford (2011) and Trimbur (2003), accounts for the inherent issues of power in writing centers and the multiplicity of cultures. This form of collaboration is necessary for resisting language suppression and finding a compromise that accepts conflicting identities rather than the singular voice promoted by the academic discourse community.

In this collaborative effort to mediate language differences, it is necessary to recognize that resistance is not the only component to combating identity suppression. Anzaldúa introduces the new *mestiza consciousness*, which alludes to the transference of one community’s values, culture, language, and other identifiable qualities to another community (2001). In enacting the new *mestiza*, she calls for a switch from “convergent thinking,” or the pursuit of a single goal through reasoning and rationalizing, to “divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa, 2001, p. 1598). This change of perspective is reminiscent of Lunsford’s (2011) and Trimbur’s (2003) proposals to find consensus through dissensus. Recognition of not only the marginalized cultures particular to the multilingual writers, but also the dominant culture, in this case, the academic discourse community, is vital in negotiating voice and conflicting identities. This acknowledgment of all communities requires a change in the perception of all languages, a process that is, as Lunsford would say, “damnably difficult” (2011, p. 73).

Still, regardless of the “difficulty,” engaging in this process would not only produce a space that is more accepting of cultural differences but also allow for a step toward building alliances between conflicting identities. Being aware of various discourses informs learners of alternate perspectives on cultural practices, including variations in understanding emotions and expressions, religious or spiritual beliefs, and traditional forms of learning. In this space, dissensus becomes the norm, rather than assuming “these specialized habits of mind and ways of talking that a person [joining the academic discourse community] must *learn* are ‘natural’ form, much less a simple indication of ability or intelligence” (Flower, 1990, “A Conceptual Framework”). By decentralizing power, alliances can be built between various language communities, which in turn, consolidate the marginalized writer’s voice and identity. Thus, acknowledging the conventions of academic discourse, along

with the particularities of dialects and other home languages, shifts the narrative away from conflict. Instead, it becomes an avenue for collaboration through which a community centered around acceptance can be established.

This shift to building alliances is especially important in a culturally complex space like Hawai‘i. To quote Dennis Kawaharada, Hawai‘i is a “microcosm of multicultural societies forming all over the world, where immigrants, refugees, and transplants are shaping new identities in new homelands, and indigenous peoples face an onslaught of peoples of different ethnicities and cultures displaying them and transforming their homelands into something new” (2004, p. 18). This diversity is reflected in UHM’s demographics. Given the complexity of the space, Hawai‘i cannot be a place in which communities and identities are separated from each other. The belief in isolation only serves to fracture and divide people that are inherently connected through occupying the same space. Instead, there is a need to build networks, as these constellations connecting people “will determine our future success, and help us navigate through rough waters” (Mahi, 2014, p. 62). Acknowledging an inclusive community of dissensus would allow for the “[celebration of] our differences and our commonalities and address traumas” through which “we begin to see ourselves in each other and release our fears; we are not alone in our struggles (Mahi, 2014, p. 62). Thus, rather than perpetuating a system of competing identities that reinforces insecurities over language use, reframing the conversation around alliances allows for a coexistence of identities within an individual. Further, it opens a space in which there is belonging—a sense of community that heals the traumas formed from conflict.

In summary, a consultant in the Writing Center is often responsible for introducing the multilingual writer to the academic discourse community; however, this role often conflicts with their responsibility to support the writer’s identities. To succeed in the academic community, students are required to adjust to the official discourse designated by the institute and those in power. This enforcement of academic discourse can lead to a suppression of the client’s voice and identities, which is especially exacerbated when the client is a multilingual student who does not identify English as their first language. The consultant is placed in a role between these two contrasting discourse communities: they are to demonstrate the rhetorical and linguistic preferences of academic discourse but should also not neglect their role as a student writer being suppressed by the institution of domination. Although there is no clear answer on how to balance these competing identities, collaboration can act as a foundation for mediation and alliances. While challenging, this act of building an open community established upon dissensus offers a way to consolidate conflict within and between individuals, which becomes increasingly vital as communities become more multicultural and diverse.

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