CHAPTER 18. COUNTERING AI SHAME IN THE WRITING CENTER: CULTIVATING TUTORING PRACTICES OF OPENNESS AND VULNERABILITY

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This essay considers the relationship between writers' shame, their use of artificial intelligence, and tutoring practices based on openness, honesty, and vulnerability. For many writers, particularly undergraduate writers, the practice of writing can be one filled with shame—about falling short of instructor expectations, about spending hours on an assignment only to receive a low grade, about procrastinating, and more. Writing tutors understand this shame. In "Shame and the Writing Center," Lauren Vedal captures the role that writing centers can play in supporting students and easing their sense of shame: "Part of what we do as tutors is to ease shame. We reassure students that their struggles are, in fact, normal. Writing is hard. Writing well is really hard."

The arrival of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) brings new opportunities of shame for writers, and this essay argues that writing centers can play a critical role in reducing writers' shame related to using GenAI and in providing a space for writers to reflect on their shame. This essay draws from the experiences of two undergraduate writing consultants to highlight strategies that writing center staff can use to shift writers away from shame and toward open, honest conversations about GenAI.

Drawing from Brené Brown's framework of shame and vulnerability and our own experiences, this essay proposes that writing centers—with tutoring philosophies based on vulnerability and openness—can encourage writers to be open about their own writing practices, even if those writing practices involve the use of GenAI. Through tutoring practices of vulnerability and openness, writing consultants and tutors can not only have open, honest conversations with clients about their specific writing practices but can also begin a broader conversation about the benefits and drawbacks of using GenAI.

WRITING PEDAGOGY, TUTORING PRACTICES, AND SHAME

For many students, the process of writing can be extremely difficult and anxiety-inducing. Anne Elrod Whitney so clearly captures the full scope of how students experience shame as a part of writing instruction:

> Almost all can also tell a story of feeling deep shame in a writing classroom. It's the story of the teacher or parent who, reading a piece of writing, told us we weren't smart. Or who responded to writing that was heartfelt and risky only with correction and a low grade. These are stories about feeling worthless in the face of or in the wake of a writing event. (130)

Focusing on the history of instructor feedback that is too critical, too overbearing, too dismissive, and too accusatory, Thomas Newkirk, too, admits: "As a writing teacher, it pains me to admit to the close association of writing and shame. But it is there" (134). Shame is a part of our history (and a part of our present practices). Jasmine Kar Tang and Noro Andriamanalina demonstrate that faculty feedback of praise and shame often uphold racialized expectations of "appropriate" academic language, serving as "another heightened site in which racialization and racism surface" (140). Writing feedback, here, serves as a tool for standardizing and "correcting" those who stray from white mainstream English practices. Still, others see shame as an integral and important part of writing pedagogy. Mary Juzwik and Sal Antonnuci argue for a reflective practice of "dialogic collaging" as a way to support "shame resilience" (147). Similarly, Anwar Ahmed suggests that we can foster students' emotional literacies and harness the productive aspects of seemingly negative emotions (53). More recently, Stephanie West-Puckett, Nicole Caswell, and William Banks center failure and shame in their writing pedagogies and assessment: "We suggest that by refusing notions of best practices and success and orienting toward failure and shame, we can develop an ethic of shared agency in writing assessment" (32).

Other scholars have called for the cultivation of pedagogies of vulnerability to counter shame. For example, Anne Liu Kellor shares her classroom activities that center gratitude rather than critique (the listener thanks the writer for sharing, or the listener tries to repeat exactly what the writer shared):

> This is a witnessing, not a critique. This is a *wow, that moved me. You moved me. And I want you to know that*. No need to say why. This is about honoring the writer and helping everyone to see how our own private, vulnerable truths bring up universal feelings. Destigmatizing shame and recognizing

> how we *all* have vulnerable places inside that we are afraid
> of exposing–and then daring to expose those places in a safe,
> communal space—this is how we create liberation. (107)

Kellor's argument for being open and vulnerable with other writers informs much of our own practices of open and vulnerable tutoring as a way to engage with writers' use of GenAI.

More recently, in his 2024 article, Louie Giray describes the phenomenon of AI shaming. According to Giray, "This phenomenon often involves dismissing the validity or authenticity of AI-assisted work, suggesting that using AI is deceitful, lazy, or less valuable than human-only efforts" (2320). Others have similarly found that students likely feel "shame about seeking help or outsourcing their work [via GenAI]" and that using GenAI "comes with a certain kind of baggage" (Zieve-Cohen et al.; Lundin).

Of course, recognizing the many ethical concerns around GenAI (environmental, labor, privacy, linguistic justice, critical thinking, and many more), faculty might engage in GenAI shaming as a way, from their perspective, to discourage the use of GenAI as an ethically dubious tool. While we recognize these legitimate concerns around GenAI use and believe that students should reflect critically on these concerns, we, like Giray, emphasize the ways that GenAI shaming can backfire: complete bans on GenAI do little to discourage GenAI use; instead, bans drive GenAI use underground as something used in secret. AI shaming can amplify the shame and anxiety that some students already feel toward writing.

WRITING CENTERS AND OPENNESS

This essay, then, suggests that writing centers play a particularly important role in reducing the shame felt by students when they use GenAI. Two tutoring principles—openness and vulnerability—are essential for working with students using GenAI. First, we recommend a tutoring practice based around openness, a willingness to suspend our own belief and concerns to work with the writer within their own writing practices.

The data is clear that students are already using GenAI: from a June 2024 survey, Schiel, Bobek, and Schnieder found that 46 percent of high school students shared that they used GenAI (4), and 66 percent of students used GenAI for "writing-related language arts courses" (9). Despite these figures, some writing faculty insist that students in their courses do not use GenAI at all. To call for a total ban of GenAI is to ignore the reality of the majority of students' writing processes in 2024. A complete rejection of GenAI would only serve as a mechanism for cultivating shame for students—a sense of shame that they already

feel when they write, regardless of their GenAI use. If we are to reduce students' shame associated with writing, then we must be willing to meet students where they are and recognize the realities of their writing processes and occasions.

One strategy we can use to center openness in our sessions is the explicit discussion of GenAI as a part of our intake survey at the start of our tutoring sessions. Along with asking writers about their goals for the writing project, the requirements for the assignment, and their major concerns, we might also ask them about their writing processes as they relate to GenAI: Did you use any GenAI when composing this essay? Is using GenAI a part of your writing process? Would you like to use or avoid GenAI during our tutoring sessions? Of course, such questions might come off as potentially intrusive: writers might suspect that writing tutors are only asking these questions in order to "catch" the client's plagiarism. Writing centers need to be clear—through intentional messaging—that our staff are not in the role of plagiarism police. We echo Lauren J. Short's view of the writing center as a "discussion-based space where writers could make mistakes and seek guidance without fear of being reported to their instructors or to the university's honor council." The drafts that writers bring in are in progress, and requirements or restrictions regarding GenAI use are between the student and their faculty member. We can, of course, help clients, when requested, interpret assignment sheets or syllabus policies to determine if GenAI use is appropriate for that class, but writing centers should not need to go out of their way to determine the faculty's expectations.

WRITING CENTERS AND VULNERABILITY

Second, we suggest that writing centers adopt tutoring practices based around vulnerability. In such a practice, writing tutors embrace mutual openness, willing to share their own experiences and practices of writing just as they ask their clients to do. Writing centers are particularly well-suited for practices that center vulnerability because writing consultations are already "a vulnerable task" (Cleary and Rymer, Chapter 6). Indeed, Brown's framing of feedback sounds almost like she's describing a writing tutoring session: "Vulnerability is at the heart of the feedback process. This is true whether we give, receive, or solicit feedback" (201). Like Lauren Brentnell, Elise Dixon, and Rachel Robinson, we recognize that vulnerability is not a one-size-fits-all solution and that significant emotional labor, not available to everyone equally, is involved with being vulnerable: "But vulnerability asks us to also be forward about our own struggles, which can leave us feeling exposed and uncomfortable in interactions with co-workers and in sessions. We are not calling for everyone to always be vulnerable." For writing tutors who are able to be vulnerable with clients, vulnerability can be an

important professional tool for helping reduce shame that some writers might feel about using GenAI.

Returning to the first strategy discussed under openness practices, we can also center vulnerability in our pre-tutoring intake conversations with clients. When asking about writers' GenAI writing practices, we might also share our own experiences with using GenAI, with an initial emphasis on the beneficial ways that we have used GenAI. Here, we are reminded of Brown's call for "normalizing" as a "critical shame-resilience" strategy: "What are common struggles? How have other people dealt with them? What have your experiences been?" (197). We might share the specific ways that we have used GenAI ("When I'm having a hard time figuring out a topic, I sometimes find it useful to prompt GenAI to share a list of potential topics" or "When I'm trying to strengthen my argument, I sometimes ask GenAI to offer some counterarguments to my essay"). Or, we might share what GenAI tools we find most helpful in our writing practices ("I find that Google Bard is more user friendly than ChatGPT" or "I find it really helpful to use InfraNodus to identify common claims or gaps in my argument"). Sharing our own GenAI practices helps to establish what Kirkwood Adams and Maria Baker (Chapter 22) call "an environment where disclosing isn't dangerous," permitting clients to be honest about their own uses of GenAI.

MADILYNNE'S STRATEGY

By offering explicit examples of their own use of GenAI, writing tutors move from a strategy of only openness to one of vulnerability. Indeed, we have witnessed a defensiveness from writers when we have asked them about their GenAI writing practices. Simply asking about GenAI practices can come across as asking the student if they were plagiarizing or cheating; from the client's perspective, the tutor becomes the investigator (see also Adams and Baker, Chapter 22) for how writers seemed more comfortable and willing to disclose their use of GenAI on job documents, which "are not governed by institutional policies"). Sharing their own GenAI writing practices can move the writing tutor back into the role of a coach or ally. Below, Madilynne shares one such example of normalizing experiences of using GenAI:

> Within our writing center, I have seen a few clients with ChatGPT pulled up in a separate tab. Each time that the writer realized that I noticed ChatGPT, they acted very defensively, assuring me that they were only using GenAI for idea generation. I assured them that their use of GenAI for idea generation was a valuable way to use the tool. After reassuring

clients that their use of GenAI was appropriate and even an effective use of a tool for writing, I would then turn to sharing my own experiences of using GenAI.

I would share how I used GenAI when I wrote my historical methods paper. I wanted to see if GenAI knew about my niche topic: the Bamberg Conference of 1926. I could not find much information about the meeting in the English sources I used, so I decided to see if ChatGPT knew anything else about it. I primarily wanted to see if ChatGPT would highlight the impact it had on Joseph Goebbels, the future Minister of Propaganda in the Third Reich. ChatGPT's response gave me a background similar to what I had found in the few English sources that mentioned it. It did not mention anything about Joseph Goebbels, who was humiliated at the meeting but would eventually go back to the party because of Adolf Hitler. I wrote a little paragraph back to ChatGPT in a bit more depth than provided above about the Goebbels aspect, and it further expanded on what I replied back. With the response, ChatGPT delved deeper into the Goebbels aspect of the Bamberg Conference. I would tell clients that, in an instance like I mentioned above, providing GenAI with a specific, rather than a vague prompt, is more effective. Sharing my own experiences with using GenAI seems to make clients more comfortable, more relaxed, as they realize that their own use of GenAI is not an illicit activity.

KATHRYN'S STRATEGY

By centering openness and vulnerability in their tutoring practices, tutors can establish a trusting, non-judgmental space for clients. By employing an open and vulnerable tutoring practice, tutors can help reduce the shame that clients feel about their writing and about their GenAI use. Once trust has been established, tutors can then move toward more critical, yet still open-minded, conversations about GenAI use and writing. Below, Kathryn shares how a strategy of vulnerability—becoming co-investigators with clients—can lead to more critical conversations about the limitations of GenAI:

I have often heard the conversation around GenAI-generated writing in higher education focused on containment, on the question of how to put boundaries around its use. While I

understand the rationale behind this, efforts to contain or re-strict undergraduate students' use of GenAI are likely too little, too late. It is a publicly available resource that is here and here to stay. Additionally, with the exception of specific fields and contexts, merely establishing boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable use of GenAI only creates new ways for its use to be considered illicit and for the shame that accompanies that. Therefore, I propose that for engagement with GenAI in writing centers to truly minimize students' shame and max-imize their writing capabilities, it must involve students as collaborators and fellow investigators into the strengths and limitations of GenAI writing. Furthermore, we must delve into the question of what the purpose of writing at the undergrad-uate level really is and how GenAI can be reframed positively as an opportunity to be reminded of the distinction between writing as a process and writing as a product.

In addition to offering one-on-one writing tutoring, our writing center also teaches the college's basic writing course, a substantial component of which involves weekly small group writing labs with writing consultants. In the fall semester of 2023, students in this course were assigned an essay that asked them to plug one of the previous writing assignments for the class into ChatGPT and then to revise the essay produced by GenAI. Though anecdotal, I felt that my experience of working through this assignment with students was incredibly beneficial. This assignment pushed me to come fully face-to-face with GenAI-produced writing for the first time in my role as a tutor, rather than the surreptitious encounters with GenAI writing I had sometimes experienced in sessions with students. As a learner, I understand that people learn far more effectively by working through problems than by memorizing the answers. As I tried to help the writers struggling to come up with criticisms of the seemingly perfect GenAI essay, I, too, found myself struggling to articulate the limitations of the GenAI-produced writing because these were aspects of writing that I hardly ever find lacking in student writing. Some of these elements include tone, voice, and original thinking. The most valuable part of this activity I found to be the conversations it generated between students and tutors

about what GenAI-produced writing, as impressive as it is, may still be missing.

I strongly believe that although the writing center is a student support service, part of the way we support students must include advocacy on an institutional level. The most difficult part of the GenAI assignment for me as a tutor was to see how much the students struggled to engage critically with GenAI-produced writing, perhaps because their prior writing instruction had emphasized all the wrong things. It was challenging to get many students to see past the perfect grammar and endless vocabulary to critique the content of the essay itself. This was hardly surprising to me, as I knew that these were some of the aspects of their own writing that students felt the most shame around. Therefore, shame of what they perceive as deficient or have been told is deficient in their own writing may very well be a crucial driver to use GenAI. Combating that shame means shifting the focus back onto why undergraduate students are asked to write, a question that must ultimately be asked of faculty. If the goal of essay writing at the undergraduate level is the thinking and learning that occurs through the process of writing an essay, then the assignment and assessment of writing must reflect these goals. Our basic writing course, for example, scaffolds the writing process by breaking essay assignments down into smaller deadlines of a half, full, and final draft. Encouraging the implementation of similar strategies in classrooms may appeal to faculty as a way to limit submission of wholly GenAI-generated assignments by students. However, these strategies also may serve to help reduce students' shame by deemphasizing the final product of their writing and creating a culture of writing in which higher value is placed on students' ideas, uniquely shaped by each individual's lived experience. Writing centers can be instrumental in facilitating such change.

HONEST CONVERSATIONS IN BRAVE SPACES

Madilynne's strategy of vulnerable sharing and Kathryn's strategy of co-investigating as ways to open up critical conversations serve as a reminder that writing centers are not spaces free of disagreement and conflict. As Bridget Draxler has argued, writing centers are uniquely positioned to have difficult conversations

about language because our sessions involve "talking about the nuance of language in a one-on-one setting with students built on a relationship of openness, respect, and trust." Here, we are also reminded of Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens' argument that we should strive toward "brave spaces" and not "safe spaces" because "safe spaces" prioritize comfort over justice: "We question, however, the degree to which safety is an appropriate or reasonable expectation for any honest dialogue about social justice.... We argue that authentic learning about social justice often requires the very qualities of risk, difficulty, and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety" (139).[1] In a safe writing center, conversations about GenAI and writing stop short of critique.

In a brave writing center, however, authentic learning necessitates an honest conversation about the limits of GenAI, the flaws of GenAI, and the very legitimate concerns about linguistic justice and GenAI. The writing center as a "brave space" is not one in which everyone—clients, tutors, administrators—agrees and ignores ethical dilemmas; instead, the writing center as a "brave space" is one in which productive disagreement and challenges move all parties toward more just thought and action.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, shame and anxiety around writing have long been common experiences for students. The rapid widespread introduction of GenAI, its integration across technologies, and resulting classroom bans have introduced a new experience of shame related to writing: GenAI shame. As students see a wide public adoption of GenAI, they might simultaneously see restrictions on their use of GenAI in their classes. Recognizing the many ethical concerns around GenAI, faculty might understandably see shame as an effective way of discouraging students from using GenAI in their writing. Yet, as we have outlined above, shame is unproductive for learning; it causes writers to freeze rather than grow. Instead of stopping GenAI use, shame marks the use of GenAI as taboo, driving it underground.

Brown's concepts of "normalizing" and "vulnerable feedback" map on closely with the writing tutoring strategies of openness and vulnerability recommended by Madilynne and Kathryn. By being open and honest about our own uses of GenAI, by recognizing the ways that GenAI can be helpful, by inviting clients to share—in a nonjudgemental manner—their own uses of GenAI, writing tutors can help to alleviate feelings of shame and anxiety around GenAI. Together,

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1   See also Kaidan McNamee and Michelle Miley's discussion of safe and brave spaces within the writing center context.

writing tutors and clients can work as collaborative partners who are willing to have honest, vulnerable conversations about their GenAI use and their feelings about using GenAI (yes, even their feelings of shame about using GenAI). By opening up to clients in vulnerable ways, we can not only invite them to be open about their own uses of GenAI, but we can also establish a trusting relationship that can open up discussions about "ethical engagement and process-awareness" (Adams and Baker). Trust can promote honest conversations about the many legitimate ethical concerns around GenAI use.

Writing is a vulnerable activity, and sharing that writing with others is particularly vulnerable. Brown's framework of "vulnerable feedback" serves as an important reminder for writing center staff that our work—individual writing consultations with clients—can play a critical role in supporting writers in the age of GenAI. Brown calls us to meet writers wherever they are, deeply listen to them, and enthusiastically learn more about their individual writing processes—whether they enthusiastically adopt GenAI, reluctantly use GenAI, or refuse GenAI.

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