Tutors' Column: "Sexism, Conflict, and Cultural Differences: What One Terrible Session Taught Me about the Assumptions I Bring to Tutoring"

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I am usually adept at avoiding conflict at the writing center. I hedge my speech with phrases like, "To play the Devil's advocate..." and "Have you considered..." when I flatly disagree with a writer. When debates among staff about politics, social issues, religion, or, heaven forbid, grammar, reach a pitch I am uncomfortable with, I fade out. Above all, I speak cautiously, weighing the impact of my ideas, the connotations of my words, and the reactions of my audience. And yet, conflict still becomes necessary, or even inevitable, at times. The following experience, which pitted my understanding of gender against that of a writer, remains one of the most bewildering yet instructive interactions I've had in nearly four years of tutoring. It taught me broadly about a conflict's tendency to reveal the assumptions we make, and more specifically, about my own tendency to assume that other women have experienced life as I have.

In Spring 2015, I clashed with an international student who attempted to build a paper on the stereotype that women are inferior in math and science. Her primary argument, that the U.S. could better serve students by increasing its gender-segregated educational options, was legitimate and compelling. However, her leading sub-claim—that girls in coed schools become discouraged because they compare their achievements to those of boys, who are supposed to have inherently greater capacities for math and science—was both unsubstantiated and blatantly sexist.

As both a woman and a former high school math tutor, I felt personally degraded by her stereotyping. However, I was more concerned about the wider consequences of her statement. In their article "Theory in/to Practice: Addressing the Everyday Language of Oppression in the Writing Center," Mandy Suhr-Sytsma and Shan-Estelle Brown argue that the use of stereotypes to support a claim "can reflect as well as support oppressive systems" (13, 16). In other words, a student's language, though limited in its circulation,

can both indicate and reproduce inequality if allowed to go unchallenged. This student's paper both proved the presence of a patriarchal system and supported that system by promoting a false image that restricts women's educational and career opportunities. According to researchers Carolin Schuster and Sarah E. Martiny, stereotyping—which can deter women from entering traditionally male arenas such as math- and science-based classes and careers—contributes to the gender gap in STEM fields (40).

The stakes of the session, therefore, were unusually high, meaning that deciding how to approach the student was unusually important. I could ignore her stereotype use, forestalling conflict but also making myself complicit in injustice, or I could respectfully challenge her stereotype use, risking an angry reaction. I deliberated for only a moment before choosing the latter of the two options. Drawing attention to the inequality of women, I decided, was more important than avoiding a potential argument. Unfortunately, the conversation that followed didn't go as smoothly as I had hoped it would; a half-hour of discussing the damaging effects of stereotyping, the expectations of her American target audience, and the lack of scholarly evidence for her belief about women, left us both on the verge of tears. By the time we parted, we had neither managed to find common ground nor created a more convincing paper. In other words, the session seemed to be, in all ways, a failure. Even discussions with a more senior staff member and several fellow tutors couldn't explain why, despite using every strategy I knew for remaining non-combative, I had caused more harm than good.

After two years of intermittent reflection, I am finally beginning to understand what happened. My thinking was sparked by reading Ilona Leki's *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers*, which considers how, to American educators, ELL students' uninterrogated assumptions seem particularly obvious and egregious only because they are different than the uninterrogated assumptions that the educators themselves make (66). I started examining the encounter for evidence of assumptions I had missed and, to my surprise, found that I was just as guilty as the student was of harboring preconceived ideas, though mine were less obvious in a liberal university context. In the process of challenging her assumption about women, I had unintentionally called on one of my own, which I learned from the subculture in which I was raised. I had assumed that, as a woman, she would share my frustration with gender-based discrimination and, therefore, my empathy for other women who experienced it. However, that incorrect assumption created confusion and frustration, instead of commonality.

My own experience of patriarchy had taught me to see every woman as an ally against sexism. I grew up in a subculture which enforced a strict, if somewhat nebulous, ideal of femininity. Being properly feminine meant wearing my hair long as well as picking out clothing, shoes, nail polish, and makeup that were "modest." (Modesty was a hazy idea that some days meant avoiding the color red, which was associated with prostitutes, and other days meant wearing shoes with low heels to avoid attracting male attention.) Being feminine also meant learning to "respect" my father (in other words, never questioning his actions, no matter how illogical, unjust, or destructive they were). Thus, I faced obstacles that I had neither the permission nor the language to publicly express, and by the time I was a teenager, I had learned to rely on a network of female support that so many women are familiar with. I learned that, by virtue of a shared experience of sexism, nearly every woman is a member of that network, and so, is bound to provide solidarity and support, especially in response to gender-based discrimination.

Because that student was a woman from a similarly patriarchal system, I assumed she was part of that network, obligated to sympathize with experiences of sexism. When she failed to respond to the argument that stereotyping hurts women, I was confused. She had broken a covenant, it seemed, betraying both me and women in general. I now understand, however, that she may have never agreed to that covenant. Being from a different country, she may not have been familiar with the network I was accustomed to, let alone its expectations for solidarity. In fact, I shouldn't have assumed she was familiar with any of those ideas, and by doing so, I made an already difficult session considerably more difficult.

Had I not botched that encounter, it might have taken me years (dare I say decades?) to realize that I assumed sharing an identity label meant sharing experiences. And making that assumption is dangerous because it fails to recognize meaningful differences, including nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and so forth. In the tutoring situation, I failed to recognize that spending our lives in different countries with different political, economic, social, and religious structures might have meant that the student and I experienced femininity differently. This is an insensitive mistake that I don't plan to make with other people. In future conversations, I will tread more deliberately, asking more questions about how the student and her culture view womanhood before I conclude that our lives have been similar. If she and I don't share a definition of womanhood, I will also be careful to rely on tutoring strategies that are less bound to my culture. For example, rather than appealing to shared experience, I may appeal

to ethos by probing for non-experiential evidence of her assertion, by directing her to literature that discusses gender as a construct, or by introducing her to accounts of successful women in STEM. Hopefully that will seem less presumptuous than my typical appeal to pathos.

To learn this lesson, though, I needed the conflict that session provided. It was the conflict that illuminated my "default," allowing me to interact intentionally, and hopefully, with greater empathy and flexibility in the future. That is not to say, however, that I've learned to like conflict, but rather that I respect it more than I once did, understanding that, while it's uncomfortable, it can also provide opportunities for growth.

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