

**“Feminized Simulations: The Writing Center as Remedial Clinic and Enforcer of the Status Quo.”** Paper presented at “Chicagoland Writing Tutors in Collaboration: The Center and Beyond,” the **Chicagoland Writing Center Conference**, at North Park University, Chicago, IL. Feb. 2009.

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**Feminized Simulations:  
The Writing Center as Remedial Clinic and Enforcer of the Status Quo**

Good afternoon. Before I begin my presentation, I’d like to ask you to turn to the back page of your handout. You’ll notice a large circle cut in half. On the left side of the circle, inside the quotation marks, I’d like you to write down the name of the object on which you are currently sitting.

Okay, in a moment, you’re going to write in the other half of the circle. When I say go, I want you to think about the word you just wrote down, and I want you to write down everything that comes to mind when you think about that word. You have to stay within the right half of the circle, and you have twenty seconds, starting now.

Okay, time’s up. We’ll come back to that, but for now, go ahead and flip back to the front page of your handout.

Today, I’m going to talk to you about the stigma of remediation that plagues all contemporary writing centers. Ultimately, this misconception depicts the writing center as a place of service rather than scholarship. So-called “women’s work” is generally defined as service-oriented, so this misconception has led to an identification of writing center work as “women’s work.” Basically, we’ve been feminized. The term “feminized” is commonly used to refer to anything that has been identified with the feminine in order to marginalize it.

For decades, writing center staff and theorists have struggled against the stigma of remediation and against the marginalization of their work, but the stigma persists, a misperception that leads to the feminization of the writing center. Why, despite considerable improvements and growth, has so little changed? Because no one has actually addressed the root of the problem: the arbitrary distinction between “good” and “bad” writing. As long as this rigid dichotomy is maintained, all attempts toward solutions will be fruitless. This distinction labels the writing center a remedial clinic and makes possible the writing center’s feminization. Finally, this distinction has forced the writing center to function as a simulation, what Jean Baudrillard defines as a system or event with no ultimate goal other than to replicate itself.

A simulation creates a false distinction, which simultaneously challenges and reaffirms the dominant order. In the case of the writing center, this distinction is between “good” and “bad” writers and their writing. The stigma of remediation placed on writing centers has led to the marginalization and feminization of such centers. As a result, the writing center has become a *feminized simulation*, an institution devoid of meaning and referent, battling its own marginalization in order to perpetuate itself. However, it inadvertently serves the status quo by creating distinctions that reinforce the patriarchal academy and reaffirm its own position along the margins of society. The only solution, then, is to discard the arbitrary dichotomy between “good” and “bad” writing and to cease the writing center’s function as a feminized simulation.

But before we can understand and implement such a solution, we must first examine the problem itself by asking a few important questions: How have writing centers become feminized because of the stigma of remediation, and how has this feminization led to their current function as simulations, through which they create the illusionary distinction between “good” and “bad” writing and writers? What are the implications of such distinctions, and how do such distinctions

reinforce the present hierarchy and—in a vicious circle—also reinforce the stigma of writing centers as feminized remedial writing clinics?

While most centers seem to have evolved beyond the point of a remedial clinic, the stigma of remediation persists. As long as writing centers are seen as places for “bad” writers, these writers and these writing centers will be marginalized. This marginalization arrives primarily through an identification of the writing center with the feminine.

Women live in a world that is, for the most part, constructed and controlled by men. In this patriarchal world, to be feminine or to be identified with the feminine is to be marginalized. The term “feminization,” then, refers to a particular type of marginalization in which someone or something is specifically identified with the feminine so that it can be banished to the margins. There’s significant evidence that the entire field of rhetoric and composition has been feminized, and the writing center stands along the margins of this already marginalized field. Because we supposedly only help “bad” writers, we are seen as merely providing remedial service, with an emphasis on service rather than scholarship, supposed “women’s work” rather than male intellectualism.

Meanwhile, theorists like Nancy Grimm claim that writing centers remain feminized and marginalized because of their current attempts to avoid marginalization, arguing that writing centers sacrifice their own clear mission in an attempt to avoid external challenges. Writing centers, like Jean Baudrillard’s simulations, both challenge and reaffirm the present order. Baudrillard defines the simulation as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality... a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.” Ultimately, a simulation is a copy of a copy in a world in which the original no longer exists. Simulations exist without meaning or motive except to perpetuate themselves indefinitely. Rather than imitating something

real, simulations exist to hide the fact that the real no longer exists at all. In explaining this concept, Baudrillard uses the prison as an example: We label the prison as the world of criminality and incarceration in order to believe in the illusion of our own innocence and freedom. Prisons exist to hide the fact that we are all criminals in one way or another and we are all incarcerated within the “banal omnipresence” of society.

For my primary research, I conducted content analysis to carefully study the specific language used within documents of the DePaul Writing Center’s website, its major training materials, and a random sample of its tutorial documentation. The numerical results of my content analysis are in Appendix A of your handout. My primary research reveals language that suggests that the stigma of remediation placed upon the center has led to its feminization, which has, in turn, led to its function as a simulation, a specifically feminized simulation that ultimately reaffirms the present patriarchal structure of DePaul University.

Language suggestive of a remedial clinic appears nineteen times in the sample of tutor logs, forty-one throughout the website, and 598 in the training materials. Tutorial documentation reveals a common thread among students who identify themselves as “bad” writers and who visit the center at the last minute to have their work “fixed.” Training materials admit the perpetuation of this misconception as well as the difficulty in defining the boundary between helping and “fixing” a writer.

Furthermore, the use of “student” as a synonym for the tutee, client, visitor, or writer at the writing center is highly problematic in that it reaffirms the stigma of the writing center as a remedial clinic. Although the majority of our tutees are, in fact, students, the center is also open to DePaul faculty and staff, so to refer to all tutees as students is to normalize the tutee population as *only* students. It implies that it would be abnormal for a faculty or staff member to

visit the writing center, that the highly educated faculty members and the highly qualified professional staff members need not deign to visit the writing center. The word “student” is used as a synonym for any tutee eight times throughout the sample of tutorial documentation, forty-one times on the website, and 582 times throughout the selected training materials. Despite our explicit openness to *all* writers at *every* level, we have normalized our tutee population as students, suggesting that, at a certain point in one’s development, one need not visit the writing center. Those who do visit, then, have not developed as far as those who do not visit, reinforcing the stigma of remediation that exists on this and all writing centers.

The constant appearance of these and other authoritative labels suggests a hypersensitivity to the rigid structure of the academy, which is symptomatic of the center’s feminization. Language suggestive of this feminization appears thirteen times within the tutorial documentation, fifty-six times on the center’s website, and 716 times throughout the center’s training materials. For instance, tutees exhibit a hyperawareness of DePaul’s hierarchy, a fact revealed by a pattern of writers who visit the center primarily concerned with addressing the comments or guidelines of their professors, a pattern that appears both in several tutor logs and within the training materials.

The staff training materials also reveal a preoccupation with this academic hierarchy, such as in the preface to one training manual which reminds readers that the writing center “could not operate without the support of the Office of Academic Affairs and the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse.” Both of these organizations on which the center depends are currently presided over by men.

DePaul exists within a patriarchal hierarchy. The school is named after a man and is founded upon principles of a patriarchal religion. The President, Chancellor, Provost, Executive

Vice President, and Secretary of the University are *all* men, and the academic and administrative officers are primarily men. Although the director and one of the assistant directors of the writing center are both women, the director reports to the male Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs, who reports to the male Provost, who reports to the male President, who must answer to the Board of Trustees, which is comprised of thirty-five men and only nine women.

Furthermore, the writing center is feminized in that it is identified with the misogynistic definition of “women’s work” as service-oriented. The word “service” or “serve,” in reference to the activities of the writing center, appears once within the sample tutorial documentation, eight times throughout the center’s website, and twenty-two times within the selected training materials. And the final symptom of the center’s feminization is the paranoia and anxiety exhibited by its staff concerning the need to justify the center’s existence to the DePaul community. This unease both reveals and reaffirms the subservient position of the writing center. Because of our vulnerable position along the margins, we cannot afford to challenge authority but must instead work to appease the faculty so the center’s existence will be tolerated.

This need to justify itself and to transform itself in response to the whims of the academy is symptomatic not only of the center’s feminization but also of its function as a simulation. Language that parallels Baudrillard’s definition of a simulation or the binary distinction between “good” and “bad” writing appears thirty-one times on the center’s website, forty-five times throughout the tutorial documentation, and sixty times throughout the selected training materials.

The writing center exists to provide people with the illusion that its tutees are “bad” writers while everyone else is a “good” writer. What the writing center disguises is the fact that such a distinction is an illusion. Our criminality and incarceration is the same, within and beyond

the walls of the prison. Our writing is the same, within and beyond the doors of the writing center, for I argue that there is no such thing as “good” writing.

However, the very existence of the writing center suggests otherwise. The *Writing Center Handbook for Graduate Assistants* states the center “is dedicated to making better writers.” But who defines “better writers” or “good” writing? Faculty members define it for their students, and supervisors define it for the staff. Both parties share one trait, however: their definition of “good” writing is dependent upon the standards and values of the patriarchal DePaul administration.

Symptomatic of its function as a simulation, the center exhibits a preoccupation with templates, boilerplate texts, and the infinite replication and recreation of past tutorial sessions. During our training, we conducted mock tutorials, shadowed experienced tutors, and were then shadowed by experienced tutors. These actions are replications of the actual face-to-face tutoring experience, and we had to experience these replications before ever tutoring independently. So the actual tutoring we have been doing since then has simply been reenactments of our earlier training experiences. Each subsequent face-to-face tutorial session has been merely a copy of a copy.

Furthermore, the DePaul Writing Center reinforces the dominant order and its own position along the margins by supporting the academic standards which delineate between “good” and “bad” writing, and it is this dichotomy that ultimately lies at the root of the problem. The center’s website instructs student writers to “always defer to your professor’s specifications for a given assignment” in a total of thirteen references which equate “good” writing with writing that matches professorial expectations or desires. The *Writing Center Handbook for Writing Consultants* makes seven similar references, and other references also appear throughout the tutorial documentation.

This emphasis placed on this dichotomy between “good” and “bad” writing merely reinforces the center’s existence as a feminized simulation. The word “good” is used in reference to writing, such as “good political science papers” or “good academic writing” seven times on the center’s website along with countless other synonymous rigid dichotomies such as “successful,” “better” or “correct.” This dichotomy also permeates the language of my sample of tutorial documentation and the *Writing Center Handbook for Writing Consultants*. However, the handbook also associates “good” writing with “good” reading and “good thinking,” and it equates difficulty in writing with poor thinking. This judgment uses a person’s “bad” writing as a symptom of “bad” or inadequate thinking. The implications of such a distinction are dangerous: “bad” writers are also “bad” thinkers, “bad” students, and “bad” individuals who deserve to be relegated to the margins of society and silenced.

The reality, however, is that “good” writing is writing that fits within the standards of the patriarchal academy. For this reason, there is no such thing as inherently “good” writing because there is no way to objectively define “good” writing. However, if we analyze this situation through another lens, we can see that “good” writing does not exist for another reason beyond the subjective nature of its definition. The DePaul Writing Center, in creating a distinction between “good” and “bad” writing, provides the illusion that there *is* such a thing as “good” writing, when, in fact, all writing is “bad” writing because all writing fails to serve its true purpose: communication.

Let’s flip over to the back page of your handout. Take a look at the word you wrote within the quotation marks. Ferdinand de Saussure argues that each particular word, text, or other representative artifact is devoid of inherent meaning. Its meaning relies on the existence of other texts around it and on the language system of which it is a part. Now look at all the writing

you did on the other half of the circle. The connection between a particular word and its denotations and connotations is an arbitrary construction. As you can see on your handout, the sign does not equal the referent. A chair is not a “chair”; it is an object we collectively agree to label as “chair.” However, it is not even an “object,” because such a term is merely another reductive label. Now I only gave you twenty seconds to write within a small space, but the fact is that we all exist within time limits and space constraints. Hopefully, you didn’t have nearly enough time or space to write down everything you wanted to. There is an infinite amount of information regarding any particular object, and so a discussion of any object requires the selection and omission of particular pieces of information. To label or discuss anything is to reduce it, so true communication is impossible.

No matter what the genre or style, every writer is struggling to communicate information through an inadequate medium: language. The writing center and the academy at large struggles to hide the fact that true communication—through writing, speaking, or any other form of representation—is unachievable. If the prison exists to hide the fact that everyone breaks the law and that everyone is encaged within the rigid confines of society, then the writing center exists to hide the fact that everyone is a bad writer because no one is capable of complete communication.

Ultimately, the writing center functions as a feminized simulation. The stigma of remediation has created a population of writers—its tutees—commonly perceived by the rest of society as “bad” writers. By virtue of this identification, all those who are not our tutees are defined as “good” writers, despite the fact that no such writers exist. The language used by the center reinforces this stigma of remediation, which reinforces the perception that the work of the writing center is service, not scholarship. Such a misconception allows the center to be identified as and marginalized with the feminine.

The unstable and vulnerable position of the writing center along the margins of the DePaul community results in the need for self-justification and an emphasis on self-perpetuation. The center has become an institution with no existing referent, empty of meaning, seeking only to replicate itself as it delineates between “good” and “bad” writing, writing that does or does not conform to the standards of the patriarchal academy on which the feminized center depends. Its function as a simulation reaffirms the academy’s standards and thus reaffirms the academy itself. This support of the academy simultaneously reinforces both the stigma of remediation and the feminized status the academy has thrust upon the writing center.

But while we may never be able to escape the language games in which we are imprisoned, writing centers at least allow us to navigate throughout the prison more freely. On a conscious level, the DePaul Writing Center is not a remedial clinic or explicitly advertised as such, nor is it purposefully identified with the feminine or marginalized. However, the language I’ve discussed suggests unconscious associations toward the opposite. One of the first steps toward a solution is to become consciously aware of these unconscious associations in order to alter the language being used and the thought processes of which such language is symptomatic.

We need to consciously admit the fact that “good” writing can only be defined subjectively and that true communication and thus “good” writing is actually impossible. With a better understanding of the problem, we can alter our language. We can rid ourselves of the static dichotomy between “good” and “bad” writing and thus move beyond problems that have plagued writing centers since their inception. We can end, or at least minimize, the stigma of remediation and the subsequent feminization of the writing center. We can bring empowerment to the “bad” writer, to the feminine, and to writing centers in general. We can deconstruct the very illusion we have inadvertently constructed so we can stop functioning as feminized simulations. Thank you.

*Appendix A. Primary Research Results: Table documenting the appearance of language suggestive of particular concerns*

Type	Remediation	Feminization	Simulation	Totals
Website	41	56	31	128
Training Materials	598	716	60	1374
Tutorial Documentation	18	13	45	76
<b>Totals</b>	<b>657</b>	<b>785</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>1578</b>

*Appendix B. Breakdown of gender among various DePaul University populations*

Gender	Tutee Sample <sup>1</sup>	Tutor Sample <sup>1</sup>	UCWbL Staff <sup>2</sup>	DePaul Student Population <sup>3</sup>	DePaul Faculty Population <sup>3</sup>
Male	7 (28.0%)	12 (48.0%)	24 (45.3%)	10774 (46.0%)	496 (57%)
Female	18 (72.0%)	13 (52.0%)	29 (54.7%)	12627 (54.0%)	374 (43%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>23401</b>	<b>870</b>

1. This sample comes from the twenty-five randomly-selected tutorial sessions used in the content analysis of tutorial documentation, accessed through *WCOonline*.
2. This information comes from the UCWbL website, *Center for Writing-based Learning*.
3. This information comes from the webpage “DePaul University: Office of Institutional Planning and Research.”

*Appendix C. Breakdown of UCWbL tutorial sessions by type from 17 September through 7 October 2008*

Type of Tutorial Session	Number of Sessions	Percentage of Total Sessions
Face-to-Face	446	81%
Feedback-by-Email	60	11%
IM/Webcam	18	3%
Quick Question	27	5%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>551</b>	

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