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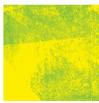
Writing Center peer tutor, Abby Bernard, describes her journey with Writing Center research. Bernard first explains her understanding of Michele Eodice’s concept of “participatory hospitality” before examining participatory hospitality in online, asynchronous writing studios. This inquiry presents an opportunity to further understand which tutoring practices may foster participatory hospitality, as well as demonstrates the process of research within Writing Center scholarship.

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# Writing Center Research: Reflecting on “Radical Reciprocity in Online Spaces”

Abby Bernard

Montana State University Writing Center

Writing Center peer tutor, Abby Bernard, describes her journey with Writing Center research. Bernard first explains her understanding of Michele Eodice’s concept of “participatory hospitality” before examining participatory hospitality in online, asynchronous writing studios. This inquiry presents an opportunity to further understand which tutoring practices may foster participatory hospitality, as well as demonstrates the process of research within Writing Center scholarship.

When you hear the word ‘research,’ what comes to mind? For me: the image of a white lab coat, a microscope, test tubes filled with mystery substances. At least, up until recently. When I applied to be a writing center peer tutor, I didn’t know that Writing Center research existed.

Actually, let’s back up... I didn’t even know what a writing center really was, or what peer writing tutors actually did. All I knew was that I didn’t mind writing all that much and that I was decent enough at it—or at least that’s what my professors seemed to think.

It’s a fairly common misconception to see tutoring relationships as strictly hierarchical: the tutor, with endless amounts of knowledge and expertise, towers over a student who is struggling to understand the difference between affect and effect or the uses of a semi-colon. I certainly fell victim to this rigid mindset. I thought, as peer tutor, I was expected to be the absolute expert on everything writing-related. I believed I would be bringing and bestowing knowledge in a one-way, transactional relationship.

Little did I know, tutoring is a two-way street. I began to see this in practice right away: writers constantly astounded me with the amount of knowledge they, both knowingly and unknowingly, shared with me within one 45-minute writing center session. Further, as I would come to discover, there is a litany of writing center scholarship and research that examines tutoring practices and theories centered on this very concept of the relational between tutor and writer.

Part of being a writing center tutor at the Montana State University Writing Center is being a student yourself—the job description states that tutors must “participate with fellow tutors in ongoing tutor

training and education (including reading, discussion, collaborative research and inquiry)” (Employment Opportunities, 2021). Often, this includes reading and responding to the existing and ongoing research occurring in the writing center world. It was during this tutor training where I first encountered Michele Eodice’s 2019 article “Participatory Hospitality and Writing Centers.” The concept of participatory hospitality is a tricky one to grasp, yet one that we at the MSU Writing Center try to not only understand, but to incorporate in every interaction we have.

Eodice (2019) refers to participatory hospitality—or ‘PH’ as we have dubbed the mouthful—as an idea that is “the result of merging the qualities of academic hospitality and guided participation” (p.1). As I have come to understand the concept (with the gracious help of my research partner, fellow writing center tutor, and friend Niah Wilson, and with the patience and guidance of Writing Center Director, Michelle Miley):

PH encourages writers and tutors to move away from insistent individualism to valuing interdependence and collaboration. This is accomplished through practices that treat students as ‘worthy of intellectual attention’ and as agents in a reciprocal, social, cultural relationship and process. By such, we mean that in higher education there is the expectation that students will excel and learn on their own. But we practice [participatory] hospitality in our tutoring models when we make students feel they are ‘worthy of intellectual attention’, when we empower them to recognize the knowledge and skills they bring to the tutoring session. And through this empowerment

students can recognize their interdependence (Bernard et al., 2021).

So, step one of this thing called ‘research’ had already begun (although I wasn’t calling it research then): familiarizing myself with the work and knowledge of others in the field.

I wouldn’t stumble into step two until a few semesters later in my tutoring career. ‘Studios’ (Grego and Thompson 2007) have been actively implemented in the MSU Writing Center, in partnership with faculty across campus, since 2013. Our studios take place in the form of small groups of writers, typically between five and seven total, who are all classmates in the same course. The small group, along with a writing center tutor known as the ‘facilitator,’ meets throughout the semester—in a space outside of the classroom—to share and talk through writing together. Students bring their knowledge of the class, the discipline, and of each other. Facilitators bring feedback, yes, but arguably more importantly, we facilitate, by not only offering our own feedback to writers, but also encouraging productive ways of discussing writing as a group.

Until COVID-19, these studio meetings were all in-person and primarily verbal. Socially distanced learning practices saw us switch to online asynchronous studio models (Miley 2018) housed in Microsoft Teams. This transition was both exciting and difficult: how could we create an online space where writers felt comfortable giving feedback and conversing vulnerably about their writing? Could PH be part of the answer? The switch to digital prompted an opportunity for us to examine, with now tangible and re-visitable records of conversations, just how we as facilitators both helped and halted PH in online studios. Our tutor research methodology is similar to how teachers research the learning that occurs within their classrooms by studying interactions (Ray 1993). We research when we study the interactions occurring within our studios and tutoring sessions. With online studio transcripts, we recognized a chance to truly research and analyze how we tutor.

### Step Two: Transcript Analysis.

Niah and I, with the invaluable assistance of Miley, began to analyze transcripts from our studios to see where we either saw PH, or didn’t. Based on our understanding of Eodice’s PH, we established three primary criteria for our analysis:

- 1) Instances of interdependence and collaboration
- 2) Instances of community formation

**“Participatory hospitality encourages writers and tutors to move away from insistent individualism to valuing interdependence and collaboration.”**

Bernard et al., 2021



FIGURE 1

Bernard (left) conducts a tutoring session for the Writing Center

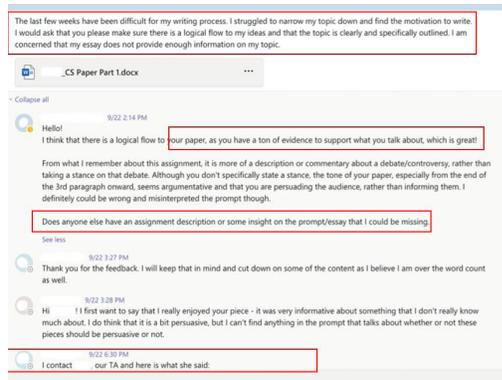
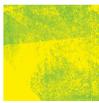


FIGURE 2  
Example of transcript analysis

Transcripts of Writing Center sessions were collected, and examples of interdependence and collaboration among writers were identified (highlighted here with the red boxes).

**“Research is everywhere,  
in every discipline.  
Research is radical.”**

Bernard, 2021

3) Instances of the facilitator learning from studio members

We sifted through mountains of transcripts from our archived online studios and began to notice how PH can both be fostered and stifled through different tutoring ‘moves’ (Figure 2).

### Interdependence and Collaboration

Facilitators are not members of the class, so we are dependent on writing studio members to bring their course-specific knowledge to the group. Not only does this point to interdependence, but it also empowers writers to know they are the experts on their subject, not the tutors. Each member of the group shares information, asks questions, and leans on one another for support. This also reminds us that writing never exists in a vacuum, writing is an inherently collaborative and reciprocal conversation.

### Instances of Community Formation

We looked for formation of community, whether it was related to writing or not. As most everyone knows, quarantine created feelings of isolation for many. The opportunity to create a community of writers in a comfortable space outside of the classroom through PH practices ties neatly into the second half of PH (hospitality). Notably, it’s not just facilitators who create community, it requires effort from each and every member.

### Instances of the Facilitator Learning from Studio Members

Writers are the experts on their subjects. There is an infinite amount of knowledge that facilitators can learn from writers, and both writers and tutors alike need to understand this. Tutoring sessions, whether they take place one-on-one or in the studio setting, are reciprocal. Everyone brings something valuable to the table and, through differing tutoring practices, this concept can not only be recognized but promoted.

Through our transcript work, we discovered a multitude of different examples of PH from writers and facilitators alike. We found that things as simple as asking detailed follow-up questions, admitting confusion, expressing interest, sharing resources, commiserating on the difficulties of online coursework, and much more, all contributed to PH in online studios.

However, PH doesn’t always work as planned. We found plenty of non-examples of PH during our transcript analysis as well. Sometimes one tutoring move will work in one studio but entirely flop in another. For example, a com-

mon practice available in Teams is the ability to 'tag' other members of the team. Tagging works to notify a member directly when they are asked to provide feedback or weigh in on something. In some studios, facilitators merely had to tag individual members with a question, therefore flagging attention, and PH would blossom. In others, tagging was entirely ignored, and a conversation became stunted before it could really even begin.

### Step Three: Sharing What We Learned.

Niah and I got the opportunity to share these examples and findings at the 2021 Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association Tutor Conference. We shared how we were understanding and trying to embody PH in our tutoring practices, and then in the true spirit of PH, asked other members of the writing center community for their ideas and input.

### Step Four: Continuing to Learn.

PH is a slippery concept and, sometimes, the more I think I understand it, the more I realize there is so much more I have yet to learn. Niah and I are continuing our work with PH in online studios, a work we have titled "Radical Reciprocity in Online Spaces." We are fortunate to have an article proposal up for the Writing Lab Newsletter and another possible conference coming Fall of 2021.

This experience has not only taught me to look critically at my own tutoring practices and what tutoring relationships are, but it has also taught me to look critically at how I understand what undergraduate research can be. Research isn't confined to the walls of a lab or the halls of the engineering wing; research is everywhere, in every discipline. Research is radical.

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**Abby Bernard** is a senior at Montana State University studying American Studies and pursuing minors in Hispanic Studies and Native American Studies. Abby has worked in the MSU Writing Center as a peer tutor since Spring of 2020 and began her "Radical Reciprocity" research in Spring of 2021. Originally from the Black Hills of South Dakota, Abby moved to Bozeman to pursue her love for hiking, skiing, and camping. In her free time she loves to read, practice amateur yoga, and soak up the outdoors in any way possible. As for the future, she is always planning her next adventure, whether it's camping in Yellowstone for the weekend or escaping to Australia for a five-month stint.