

Sites of Learning: UWM Writing Center

11/27/2018

We've been considering the importance of community literacies, community languages, and community sites of learning. It has surfaced through some of our readings, most recently in *Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies* by [Steven Alvarez](#).

Alvarez chronicles the experiences of immigrant parents trying to help their children through homework that they don't fully understand and of those students who are learning to broker languages – in these cases Spanish and English – as they simultaneously learn from homework mentors and help their parents learn as well.

While most of the vast linguistic repertoires that students have is due to sites of community learning, not classroom learning, there are few places that offer an overlap or an in-between. However, the campus [Writing Center](#) may be a space in which these two sites of learning could mesh.



The Writing Center is available to all students and faculty of UWM. It is promoted as a learning site separate from the instructor and the classroom that allows students an alternate learning site.

As a tutor, I've learned how highly the Writing Center values their space as safe from the tensions, judgments, and pressures that may be felt in the classroom. Our job is to be readers and listeners for writers at all stages of the writing process. We never write on papers or share information about students with their instructors. It is a confidential space for students to come and talk through their writing and learning processes with other writers.

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Since I also teach English 101, I've been comparing my relationships with students in the classroom as an instructor and in the Writing Center as a tutor. What I've learned from these comparative observations is the importance of valuing sites of learning outside of the classroom.

How can we incorporate local community literacies, languages, and linguistic practices into the Writing Center, since it's promoted as a site of learning outside of the classroom?

I recently worked with a student who was frustrated about not being able to voice their own opinion in a paper. I could see their personal connection to the topic, and their struggle with adhering to the instructor's restrictions.

I encouraged them to see if the instructor would be willing to allow a personal voice in this paper, given the community connection that the student had to the topic, as it added a richness to the rhetorical situation of the assignment. Their powerful vocalization was deftly and rhetorically woven into their writing (in non-academic English) for a topic that affected a community they identified with.

I wanted to change the assignment for them. I wanted to show the instructor the linguistic and rhetorical choices this writer had made in order to craft this well-written (albeit first-person) paper. While I couldn't change the assignment, or change how the instructor would grade the student, I could offer myself as a listener.

I listened as with thick emotion in their voice they shared about this difficult topic tied to their sense of identity in their community. I was reminded of [Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening*](#), which we read earlier this semester. She encourages us to find a space of listening in which we don't project ourselves onto the speaker, but instead disengage ourselves from identifications and simply (though it's not simple) listen.

Alvarez and Ratcliffe stress the importance of listening in order to respect the identities of others and the community knowledge they possess. We offer a space for students to be heard and [rhetorically] listened to; how can we incorporate more than shadows of classroom practices? How can we make space for community literacies, languages, and learning practices?

In the Writing Center, there are still pressures, constraints, and consequences coming from the classroom, and students feel them. And so, I don't really leave this post with an answer, but rather a question:

How can UWM's Writing Center learn from local community sites of learning in order to better its vision and realization of being a safe site of learning outside of the classroom?

~DK~