

Retention and the Male Psyche: Compounding Issues in the Writing Center

Oakland University

WRT 320

Abstract

This research essay is concerned with the disparity between female and male consultants in the Oakland University Writing Center (OUWC) and any effects such a ratio may have on the clientele. In this essay the focus will shift from an initial statement of the issue and hypothesis to a brief review of research on the subject and then finally move onto how that research is related to the OUWC in particular. A final recommendation of action and further primary research concludes, serving as a definitive statement of the issue and a call to inquiry.

Introduction to the Issue

It was recently brought to my attention that I am one of exactly three men who work at the Oakland University Writing Center (OUWC), and one only does reception work. I was always aware of this on some level, but on another it was a bit of a revelation. With this in mind, questions began to arise, one leading to another. Why is this? Is this ratio reflected in the Writing Center (WC) clientele? Most importantly, is this the *cause* of the potentially similar ratio in the clientele? With this in mind I set out to find answers to these questions, to determine whether the female-male worker ratio at the WC affects the same client ratio. Supplementary to this is the question of whether one gender is more averse to using the WC in the first place, or to peer tutoring in general, and if having more of one gender or another will encourage use of the WC. My initial thoughts on the topic led me to the hypothesis that men use the WC less, and that this is reflected in the highly unbalanced ratio of workers. To examine this possibility I set about doing research, both primary and secondary, and the results were in one sense predictable and in another perplexing.

Review of the Issue

The research of this issue as it relates to my hypothesis is extensive, and a brief review is necessary before synthesis with and analysis of my own data can occur. To begin, in a study done by Wright in 2003 at the Academic Assistance and Resource Center (AARC) at Stephen E. Austin State University in Texas, it was found that male students in particular resent asking for help. Wright's study was conducted using a group of developmental mathematics students, but the results were applicable to peer tutoring as a whole at the university. Like the OUWC, the AARC suffered from a massively disparate female-male clientele ratio. Wright stated, "the

percentage of female developmental mathematics students who were AARC clients (77%) was significantly greater than the percentage of male developmental mathematics students who were AARC clients (23%)” (Wright, 2003). With their female clients significantly outstripping their male counterparts, the heavily weighted clientele ratio caused Wright to wonder why. The answer came down to one simple fact that is well documented in the first place; men do not ask for directions.

It is a simple truth, but Wright had no idea it would transition from road trips to academic peer tutoring so well. Wright began her study with the goal of determining why prospective clients might stay away from the AARC, for in a previous study it was determined that same sex tutoring pairs did not increase or decrease the overall efficacy of an individual session. This previous study did not answer Wright’s question, though, and so she chose to focus her analysis on what could possibly motivate females to use the AARC more often than males (Wright, 2003). Interviewing a wide range of both male and female AARC clients and tutors, some of whom had not bothered to utilize the service until the second, third, or fourth time taking a class, the answer they gave as to why there were so few males was ubiquitous: They blamed it on being lazy or prideful. In fact, it was referenced by virtually all the polled students and tutors, who said things such as, “It’s a pride thing with guys,” “I’m stubborn; I don’t know if that’s just me or guys in general with math are stubborn,” “I guess they’re stubborn in a way,” “A little bit of pride--and I may be a little bit lazy too,” “They don’t feel like it, or they’re just too lazy or just don’t think they need it” (Wright, 2003).

How wonderfully self-deprecating, but as Wright proposes, these answers are just a deflection away from the real answer. Men do not want to seem incompetent, to the point that they would rather be labeled lazy or obstinately prideful. Another term for this mentality is

referred to as having an external locus of control (Driscoll & Wells, 2012). Those who have an external locus of control attribute failings to external forces, such as bad luck or poor teaching. In this case, Wright's research indicates that many males have a highly external locus of control. This prevents them from seeking help, because if none of it is their fault, if they *could* do it at any time but do not want to because they are lazy, then they do not really *need* tutoring. It is a method of protecting themselves from feeling inadequate, uncomfortable, or out of their element.

This is understandable, especially when applied to the WC. WCs are, more than math or science tutoring centers, not widely considered "male" places (Tipper, 1999, p. 34-35). Tipper (1999) even suggests that in a WC males will see distinctly feminine aspects, and this may not be entirely untrue (p. 34-35). A love of reflection, the thought necessary for good writing, is not common of the typical male. Tipper says, "There are plenty of guys who do like to do those things and are good at them. That is true. But they are not 'real men.' They know it, and the other, real men know it—which brings us to the tribe. [...] So, for these guys who like to read and write and talk, the writing center is their tribal haven" (p.34) That is to say, while there "plenty" of guys who do like writing, plenty is still not a majority. If the WC is a haven for only some males, then for most it is a place where they feel out of their comfort zone.

This is in part because, as pointed out in Wright's research, guys do not like asking for help, but there is also another factor at play, and that is non-directive tutoring. Non-directive tutoring is the paragon of tutoring styles. As Brooks (2011) put it in his essay, "The less we do to the paper, the better. Our primary object in the writing center session is not the paper, but the student" (p. 132). Encouraged in WCs throughout the country, to the point that it has become a standard, males simply don't get non-directive tutoring (Tipper, 1999, p. 36-37). Tipper says, "Other teachers and I often hear the complaint from the boys that their writing center consultant

did not 'do enough.' The boys do not understand the kind of help they receive when their questions are answered with questions" (p. 36-37). Males are traditionally more direct and straightforward, with no nonsense or beating around the bush. A place which encourages reflective thought and self-awareness through indirect means must truly be a confusing and frustrating place for many, and a noteworthy factor in what keeps many guys away (p. 37-38).

These two aspects, males' unwillingness to ask for help and the perception of WCs as a place ill-suited to them, come together to form an academic kiss-of-death for male students. A potential solution is found in Maxwell's essay. Maxwell (1990) states, "Tutees' expectations impact the tutoring process; students earn higher grades when they work with tutors of the same sex; and the number of sessions students attend is related to their ethnic background and their tutor's sex" (p. 14). Notice the emphasis on the tutee's *expectations*. It is not that same-sex tutor/tutee pairs are more effective on that merit alone, but that they are more effective because tutees *believe* that to be the case. This commonality promotes growth because the tutee expects it to. Along with this Maxwell points to her own research, indicating frequent tutoring helps maintain retention, keeping students from flunking out or quitting, and together they form the basis of her conclusion (Maxwell, 1990, p.14). Maxwell says that considering the research done on the effects of tutoring and that "studies strongly suggest that, regardless of the subject, being tutored by a member of the same sex leads to better grades," (p. 16) it would be advisable to ensure WC faculty are equally staffed, with males and females to handle the tutoring needs and expectations of each gender (Maxwell, 1990, p. 16).

These are the central ideas relevant to the issue. Male students do not like seeking help, they do not view the WC as a place geared toward them, and centers without male tutors for male clients may be less effective.

Primary Research Data

With this in mind I began my own research by taking a sample of 134 OUWC clients from September 14 to November 14 of the fall 2012 semester, the total time I had been working at the center, and separating them by discernible gender traits. The data was gathered using an iPad survey program tutee/tutor pairs fill out before and after each session, and this tutor sample group was roughly one-tenth of the total clientele for the 2012 fall semester up to that point. The results were telling, and followed along with my hypothesis. Just over twice as many females as males use the services offered by the OUWC, 92 of the original 134 being female, with a resultant female-male ratio of 2.2-1. While I had no articulate reasoning for my belief prior to research that this would be the case, it was nonetheless proven true. The WC staff gender ratio correlates with the clientele.

Analysis

Looking at both the primary and secondary research, it is not hard to see one corroborates the other. The OUWC's clientele statistics fall in line with those of the research done by Wright, and the essays by Tipper and Maxwell offer insight as to why. The WC, staffed almost exclusively by female tutors who have gone through the required WRT 320 Peer Tutoring course, is a model of the non-directive tutoring style. This, besides possibly making traditional male students uncomfortable and frustrated, presents males with an image of the WC as an overtly feminine place. This makes sense when accounting for the OUWC clientele, as males tend to see the world through gendered stereotypes even when those stereotypes are untrue, (Tipper, 1999, p.38) which explains why so many prefer to work with males or in all male groups (Christianakis, 2010). So, even if there would be no difference between the tutoring

received from a female or male tutor at the WC, male students will perceive male tutors as more direct, and be more likely to come for that reason alone. Considering this and the extremely skewed staff ratio at the OUWC, it is little wonder more females use this resource.

Besides this, there are statistics from Oakland University's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment which shed further light on the topic. Specifically, OU's retention rate shows that males are dropping out more frequently than females. The incoming female-male ratio is currently 60-40, but 64% of OU's degrees are awarded to females. This means the additional 4% jump between enrollment and graduation must be accounted for by attrition of the male student population (Office of Institutional Research, 2012). Not only does the male student population atrophy at a faster rate than the female, however, but the fact that it does so is another result of males' unwillingness to seek help, resulting in lower grades, resulting in dropouts.

Put simply, it is a self-perpetuating cycle, and the OUWC is at a disadvantage to begin with. Realistically the WC would not be able achieve a perfect 50-50 clientele ratio, considering the enrollment ratio, and should aim to reflect the overall university population with a 60-40 ratio. However, the male psyche coupled with males' lower retention rate means the WC will be unable to match even that, which explains why more than twice as many women use the WC than men.

Conclusion and Suggested Recourse

In conclusion, this research articulates something already well known, that men do not ask for help, and points out how this is presently affecting the OUWC. It shows how the root, men's attitudes toward seeking help, exacerbates the issue of retention and results in the current problem we are facing in both the WC and the university. The available recourse is an intuitive one, self-evidently so. The WC should make a concerted effort to hire more male tutors, which

will help present an image of the WC as a place where males can feel at ease. Doing so will also present an image of tutors who will be more direct and “take care of business.” While this may not always be true, as the WC always emphasizes non-direct, writer-focused tutoring, it will still aid in getting more males to use the service. These strictures could potentially fix both the WC’s and university’s problems of low male usage and retention, as tutoring frequency is directly correlated with improved grades (William & Takaku, 2011, p. 6).

There is a problem with this solution, though, as the OUWC requires almost all of its tutors to have taken WRT 320. This class is mostly comprised of female students, and such a requirement naturally causes a similar skew in the staff as well. To remedy this, I recommend an effort to promote the WRT 320 course among a more diverse student demographic, presenting it so it not only appeals to those who wish to work at the WC, but other WRT majors as well. Furthermore, while WRT 320 is a superior method of training tutors, occasionally making exceptions would be advisable. Male tutors simply are not common in the WRT 320 class; consciously looking for and picking them out of other writing classes would be helpful.

Finally, there is a need for further research. The WC itself should focus on the demographics of its clientele, something which it currently does admirably, but with no regard for gender. Surveys and research specifically designed to determine why males are underrepresented would be useful, and help draw a more definitive conclusion than what has been done here.

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