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## Manuscript Proxemics in Writing Center Sessions

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### Abstract

Empirical research on object proxemics is nearly nonexistent in writing center scholarship. This article describes a notation method for observing object proxemics in writing tutoring sessions. A small pilot study of manuscript proxemics in 50 tutoring sessions indicates the system is replicable among more than one observer. The method can be adapted to other settings and can provide useful data for writing center supervisory personnel.

### Introduction

For many years, writing center scholars have pointed out the critical need for empirical research concerning writing center practice and theory (e.g., North; Pemberton and Kinkead; Babcock and Thonus), but only recently have specific methodologies been discussed at length in ways that apply them to data collection and analysis specifically for writing center settings (Babcock and Thonus; Driscoll and Perdue; Ligget, Jordan and Price).

Indeed, this project came to fruition as a result of my need, as writing center director, for such empirical data. During a recent pre-semester training session, I had just explained the importance of positioning the tutee's paper closer to the tutee than the tutor. I pointed out that doing so helps emphasize authorial ownership and sends the message that the tutee is the one who should make decisions about the manuscript. A newly hired tutor asked, "What actually happens most of the time? Do students usually try to place the paper in front of the tutor?" Though I answered that such was often what took place, and the more experienced tutors confirmed my assertion, I realized that I did not actually *know*, in any empirical way, that this was the case.

It appeared that our writing center program might have fallen victim to what Shamon and Burns label writing center "orthodoxy" (136). In other words, though the advice given in many writing center readings and in my tutor training materials (i.e., that tutees will often try to subtly give over control of their papers by positioning manuscripts closer to the tutor) seems to make sense, we only accept it as valid because it is often repeated and sometimes observed.

In this instance, what was needed was a way to inform our practice via empirical evidence. What I then sought to develop was a way to observe sessions and record the data in a consistent way.

To that end, this article describes a method developed for collecting data regarding the placement and movement of specific objects utilized during writing center conferences. It also reports the results from a small-scale piloting of the method. An important goal here was to confirm that the method could be replicated reliably between more than one observer.

### Literature Review

In his groundbreaking book, *The Silent Language*, Edward T. Hall firmly establishes the importance of what we now reductively call “body language.” In the Introduction, Hall stresses the importance of “the non-verbal language which exists in every country in the world and among various groups within each country” (14). He further explains that people are, for the most part, “only dimly aware of this silent language” despite the fact that it is used constantly (14-15). Hall is discussing gestures, perceptions of time, physical proximity to objects and other people, and the arrangement and assignment of home and workspace. He later develops a sort of shorthand system to specifically record “proxemics,” a term he coined for human “use and structuring of space, particularly the *unconscious* patterns that deeply influence life” (“Proxemics and Design” 24). He explains that the goal of proxemics is to study “how man unconsciously structures microspace—the distance between men in the conduct of daily transactions, the organization of space in his houses and buildings, and ultimately the layout of his towns” (“Notation” 1003).

Hall and subsequent researchers explore a variety of elements that have an effect on human interactions in public and private settings. Focusing on how the use of space can affect architectural design, Bryan Lawson, in *The Language of Space*, explains its importance:

Space is both that which brings us together and simultaneously that which separates us from each other. It is thus crucial to the way our relationships work. Space is the essential stuff of a very fundamental and universal form of communication. The human language of space, whilst it has its cultural variations, can be observed all over the world, wherever and whenever people come together (14).

Certainly, writing centers are places where people come together, and our scholarship has a long history of recognizing the importance of space and its effects on the conferences we conduct. In terms of structural layout and design, Kinkead and Harris’ *Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies* provides an excellent starting point for examining different writing center floor-plans. Others have gone beyond scrutinizing extant writing centers and instead describe a vision of an optimal space for a writing center: one that has not been adapted to be used as a writing center, but rather a location that has been designed to be one from the beginning (Hadfield, et al.). Though not specifically studying proxemics, some researchers comment on how the writing center environment allows for physical interaction that differs from that of the usual classroom setting (see especially Cardenas; McInerney; Stachera; and Bemer).

Boudreaux studies nonverbal behavior specifically, in particular “eyegaze, latching, simultaneous speech, silence, vocalics, and laughter . . . in order to determine the effects of these various behaviors on the interaction of the [tutorial] pair” (iv). More recently, Thompson provides detailed analysis on the use of gesture in writing center conferences.

Thus, writing center proxemics has been studied from the broadest conception as the layout and design of the square footage of the facility, to how that layout and design might affect the tutor-tutee interpersonal interaction, to the microanalysis of that interaction in terms of verbal and non-verbal behavior. However, one proxemic variable, while drawing the attention of scholars in other fields, has remained largely ignored in empirical writing centers scholarship. Indeed, there has taken place a rediscovery of Hall's research, especially as it relates to human-object proxemics (aka "object proxemics").

Object proxemics has emerged recently as particularly important in recent research that applies Hall and others' work to the design of technologically rich "ubicom" (ubiquitous computing) environments such as computer labs, workspaces, and media-rich interactive displays (Marquart and Greenberg). In attempting to optimize ucomp contexts, they have come to conclusions that harken back to Hall's seminal research: an individual's distance and orientation to a given object, how, where, and how many times that object is moved all "have inherent meaning, and affect human-object interaction and human activity" (Surie, Baydan, and Lindgren 157).

Though writing center scholarship discuss object proxemics in some length, unfortunately it has been written about mostly as a series of what Thompson calls "admonitions" (418), that is, guidelines for helping tutors avoid being too directive. These articles are usually meant to provide practical advice and guidelines for writing center tutors. Among one of the most cited examples of such literature is Jeff Brooks' "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work" in which very specific proxemic advice is provided. Brooks states that a tutor should "try to get the student to be physically closer to the paper than you are" and, if at all possible, "don't let yourself have a pencil in your hand." While the tutee reads aloud his or her paper, the tutor should "suggest that he hold a pencil while doing so" (3). Finally, under the heading of "Defensive Minimalist Tutoring," Brooks suggests that if a student tries to force the tutor to edit the paper, "physically move away from it—slump back in your chair or scoot away" (4).

Likewise, Ryan and Zimmerelli advise that tutors and tutees should sit side-by-side and to "keep the paper in front of the student" (18). Edlund recommends much the same, stating "it is best to sit side by side with the student" but that "it is generally better to **avoid making any marks on the student's paper**" (216; bold font in original).

The point here is not to say that these positional maxims are inherently wrong or harmful, just unexamined, what Shamon and Burns call a sort of writing center "bible," contending that "the power of this orthodoxy permeates writing center discourse, where we sometimes find statements that come from a range of assumed values rather than from researched findings" (135-136). What may seem to be common sense practice in writing conferences may indeed congeal into "ideology rather than examined practice" (136).

In an effort to develop more empirical ways to examine our practices, this paper 1) describes a new method for recording object proxemic data in writing center tutoring sessions and 2) reports the data collected from a small piloting of the method.

## Method

Using a system designed for tracking the proxemics of a manuscript in relation to the student and tutor, the data collected for this project come from observations of tutoring sessions in a specific writing center. I developed the methodology in the 2009/2010, loosely basing it on Hall's system of recording body language and proxemics between individuals ("Notation"). The exact methodology is explained in below.

This approach, then, fits into Liggett, Jordan, and Price's taxonomy as a "descriptive empirical inquiry," in which "researchers reporting the outcomes of such inquiry depict and interpret what they observed within a particular context" (67). This point is significant in that the goal of this type of research does not seek to come up with any specific guidelines about what are best practices, but rather find out what practices actually occur in a particular setting. Because the data collected are "specific to a local context, they should not be generalized to dictate global courses of action for other writing centers" (67).

## Context and Participants

Those conducting the observed sessions were the peer tutors at Western State University's writing center (for confidentiality, this is a fictitious name). A large, state-supported, master's-granting institution located in a diverse urban environment, headcount enrollment at WSU exceeds 30,000 students. WSU is considered a "commuter campus," since only about 1,200 of these students reside on campus

Although there is no universal model for writing centers, such programs, when compared with those at similar institutions are often quite similar (Griswold 10-11). WSU's Writing Center (WSWC) reflects the programmatic structure and services offered by writing centers at other large, public master's-granting universities nationwide: it is staffed by undergraduate and graduate student peer tutors who are mostly English majors, the UWC offers writing tutoring to the general campus student community

The peer tutors are all WSU undergraduates and graduate students. Each of the tutors works approximately 15 to 20 hours per week for the WSWC program. Those hours are divided among on-site tutoring, in-class tutoring, and workshops, with approximately 90% of their time devoted to onsite tutoring in the WSWC.

## Session Observations

During the course of a recent semester, I observed 50 tutoring sessions and recorded the location proxemics of the manuscript in each. In addition, in order to test the consistency of the system among observers, a research assistant trained in the notation system observed the same 50 sessions, likewise making notations on the observation sheets.

Figure 1 (email [griswold@csulb.edu](mailto:griswold@csulb.edu)) shows the observation sheet used to record the movement of the manuscript as well as the frequency of its being touched by tutor and student. The information to be recorded at the top of the form is self-explanatory, and can be altered to suit the nature of the writing center and the sort of demographic information that is available and/or seen as needed by the researcher. Such a sheet can be adapted to record the proxemics of other objects such as writing instruments, etc.

The bottom of the form is used to record the placements of the student's paper. This form was designed around a situation where tutor and tutee are seated side-by-side facing a rectangular table and the observer has a view of the tutoring station from behind. This too can also be altered to fit the layout of a particular writing center. Figure 2 (email [griswold@csulb.edu](mailto:griswold@csulb.edu)) illustrates the arrangement of the writing center for which this observation sheet was developed. All five tutoring cubicles consist of a table and two chairs facing the wall, with two five-foot dividers on each side. An observer seated at one of the round tables in the central open area of the room can discreetly observe any one of the five tutoring areas.

The marking methodology is straightforward, but it does require that the observer pay close attention. As a session is observed, he or she makes markings as indicated in Figure 3 (email [griswold@csulb.edu](mailto:griswold@csulb.edu)). The "t" and "s" in the circles represent the seat placement of the tutor and student. The "X" indicates the first placement of the hardcopy paper on the tutoring table, with an accompanying number to indicate the approximate time the paper remained there. A single hatch mark indicates minutes, while a double hatch mark indicates seconds. Arrows indicate the change in location of the paper. If the paper is put aside or placed in another neutral position (such as the center top of the table) and both parties are ignoring it, an arrow is drawn to the central "neutral area," and the time it remains "out of play" is recorded. Finally, any time either party touches the manuscript—whether or not its position is changed—that touch is recorded next to the appropriate label "tutor" or "tutee."

Figure 3 (email [griswold@csulb.edu](mailto:griswold@csulb.edu)), then, records a 42-minute, 13-second session. The form illustrated indicates that the initial placement of the manuscript was in front of the student. It was then positioned in front of the tutor but quickly (after three seconds) went back to the student, where it remained for 15 minutes. It was then placed in front of the tutor for seven minutes and then transferred back to the student for an additional 10 minutes. Thereafter it was placed aside in a neutral position until the end of the session. During the session, the manuscript had been touched eleven times by the tutor and seven by the student.

## Results

Table 1 (email [griswold@csulb.edu](mailto:griswold@csulb.edu)) shows the average duration of these two proxemic events of the 50 sessions observed: session length and manuscript (MSS) possession, disaggregated into tutor, student, or neutral (i.e., the manuscript was not in direct possession of either). In addition, the instances when the tutor and the student touched the manuscript are tallied, as are the instances of the manuscript changing from one of the three possessions: tutor, student, or neutral. Both the results of the principle investigator (PI) and the research assistant (RA) observations of the same 50 students are shown.

These data indicate that on average, in any given session, the manuscript was in the possession of the student at least twice as long as that of the tutor. In addition, at the end of a sessions, a manuscript was much more likely to be in the possession of student or in a neutral position (for the PI  $n=19$  and  $n=23$  respectively, and for the RA,  $n=16$  and  $n=20$  respectively) than in the possession of the tutor (for PI,  $n=8$ ; for the RA,  $n=14$ ).

Of particular interest is the high number of recorded instances where the paper was located in a “neutral” position at the end of the session. Both the research assistant and I recorded at least 40% of the sessions concluding with the student’s paper ending in a neutral position (n=20 and n=23, respectively). Disaggregation of the end-of-session manuscript location data in the last three rows of Table 1 (email [griswold@csulb.edu](mailto:griswold@csulb.edu)) by the tutor and the number of semesters tutoring experience he or she had. Table 2 (email [griswold@csulb.edu](mailto:griswold@csulb.edu)) provides the results.

The data in Table 2 (email [griswold@csulb.edu](mailto:griswold@csulb.edu)) suggest that sessions conducted by experienced tutors tended to have the manuscript in a neutral position far more often than those conducted by tutors with fewer semesters tutoring experience.

## **Discussion**

The data suggest that at least in a small-scale study such as this one, observer consistency in recording proxemic events in tutoring sessions is achievable. In all but the last three categories of proxemic data collected, PI and RA totals were within 3 minutes/instances of each other. The most discrepant counts occurred in the penultimate category where the RA recorded more instances than I did of the session ending with the tutor in possession of the paper (n=14 and n=8, respectively). Given the total number of sessions and the closeness of the counts in all other categories, it seems safe to say that after taking the time to become familiar with the system, two or more observers will record fairly consistent data. The next step is to test this methodology with a larger sample. If successful, observations could then be possible among several observers across different facilities and/or institutions, with the assurance that the data collected are comparable.

Having described and tested this method of proxemics observation, a likely question is this: in our age of video technology, why use such a method to record the session details? Why not digitally record the session, and thus have video as well as audio? Actually, there are some significant advantages to this method:

### **Cost-effectiveness**

Despite the blossoming of writing center scholarship and pedagogy as well as the presence of a few cutting-edge multi-modal digitally-enhanced flagship programs, it is still safe to say that at many institutions, writing centers are poorly funded and are not considered sites of significant research, and thus are not able to garner funding for such technology. This methodology lets the researcher gather the data at minimal cost.

### ***Non-intrusiveness***

The presence of video equipment can affect the dynamic of a writing conference (e.g., one or both of the participants can become camera shy). In addition, while I cannot say it would be the case elsewhere (though I suspect it would be), making video recordings of tutoring sessions at my institution would necessitate having both tutor and student sign informed consent release forms, prior to which both the forms and the methodology would have to go through extensive examination and be vetted in both meetings and paperwork that could well drive a researcher to drop the whole project. However, there is, as of yet, nothing to prevent a director from sitting down in the writing center, observing sessions, and taking notes.

### ***Portability and Adaptability***

As a result of the two advantages listed above, this method easily can be taken “on the road.” In other words, it is possible to make similar observation in multiple writing centers (or even writing conferences in other settings) and thus collect comparative data.

### ***Potential for Supervisory Improvement***

The only way the data can be collected is via the researcher sitting down and focusing on the sessions. Writing center directors are often very busy people with myriad distractions: faculty requests, funding issues, payroll, etc. But this method of observation, aside from the value of the data collected, forces the observer to focus and experience the writing center in a way that may not have happened in a long, long, time.

### **Conclusion**

One of the goals of this project was to test the replicability and consistency of the method among different observers, and the results discussed above suggest that reliable data can be collected when more than one observer is utilized. However, if more than two observers gather data, further piloting might well be warranted.

More immediate effects have resulted from this small study: I have been able to more accurately address the question raised by that new tutor. Now in our tutor training I explain that while my observations do not necessarily apply to all sessions in our writing center nor to those in any other context, I can safely say that I have observed the tendency for the paper to end up in the neutral position more frequently when the session is conducted by an experienced tutor. We then are able to have a productive conversation on why this is so.

In terms of more ambitious projects, the methodology described here has many possibilities for large-scale observation of object proxemics in writing centers. For example, it would be interesting to compare data taken from different universities in the same state system or even among different institutional types. Are the proxemics of a tutoring session at a community college similar to those at a four-year university, a PhD-granting institution, or even a private liberal arts college? The focus may also be changed: data could be gathered on the proxemic activity of writing instruments, chair positioning, etc. Finally, demographic data could be examined in relation to writing center theory/practice in terms of space and identity.

But in the end, for me, this methodology’s value lies in that it provides a way for a writing center director to efficiently and reliably take a look at what actually goes on in a writing center’s sessions. Thus, rather than assuming certain things are, or are not, happening, he or she can actually see and document what takes place, and then adjust training accordingly.

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