WHEN BULLIES ENTER THE WRITING CENTER

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Sometimes our problems come to us wearing faces; sometimes these faces are tearful. Such was the case several years ago when a tutor appeared in my office halfway through the semester, angrily crying, trying to explain that a group of female tutors was making her life miserable in the writing center. She didn't want to confront them; instead, she wanted me to do something. I listened actively and sympathetically as she described behavior that included ignoring or shunning her, discussing her inadequacies in her presence and gossiping about her with other tutors.

I was more than a bit taken aback because I was proud of our writing center's *esprit de corps*, a spirit represented by our logo: a group of meerkats huddled atop a desert mound looking out for one another. "Individually", they seem to say, "we may not arouse fear, but as a group we're to be reckoned with. Approach us with respect". Despite my tutor's heartfelt tale, I really didn't want to believe that anyone – let alone a group – would behave negatively, destroying our center's welcoming ambience. But, for the following reason, my perspective changed to consider the possibility of bullying.

As a professional courtesy to my colleagues in public education, I spend time in high school classrooms talking with seniors about college-level expectations. After the visit from my unhappy tutor, when next I visited a group of students I couldn't help but notice anti-bullying agendas posted prominently in the building's hallways. Indeed, my colleagues in public schools tell me that bullying and harassment are relevant topics in their field. They tell me that though Columbine might seem long ago and far away, everyone is aware that it could happen again. Indeed, the Federal Government's Center for Disease Control [1] underscores the presence of bullying, noting as recently as 2010 that nearly 20% of high school students report being bullied. So, given the obvious severity of the phenomenon at the secondary school level, I began to consider the possibility that bullying had graduated from public school campuses and entered our writing center.

I began to believe that this bullying behavior was possible because we in writing centers can leave ourselves open to abuse. We are – by the very nature of our purpose – cooperative, diplomatic, courteous and polite. We strive to accommodate stressed-out students, sharing their anxiety as peers and as practitioners of active listening. If you believe, as I do, that most writers have the solutions to their problems within themselves, then you can realize the power of active listening, a cooperative stance that may make us seem as meek as meerkats. Unfortunately, this spirit of tolerance can work against us, an observation shared by Beate Shuster, [2] who notes in "Rejection and Victimization by Peers: Social Perception and Social Behavior Mechanisms" that cooperation may, in fact, provoke aggression in some people. Our cooperative, polite attitude, which we project to appear helpful, can be seen by bullies as an indication of weakness, marking us as likely victims of their behavior.

I have seen this in certain students who visit us in the writing center: they can be loud and confrontational. Here I'm reminded of a writer who complained about a tutor: "If she won't write my paper", he demanded, "then what kind of writing center is this?" My reply: "Here's paper; here's pencil. Let's write. And, I recall a student who wanted a tutor to take his spoken ideas and write them for him in Standard Academic American English, printed according

to MLA format. For this writer we wrote notes and helped him organize them.

But the situation confronting me wasn't about those rare students trying to bully us into composing their papers; it was about something more integral to our writing center: it was about feeling safe and secure in our space.[1] So, I began to read a bit more deeply into bullying.

Besides providing the useful definition that "Bullying is a conscious and willful act of aggression and/or manipulation by one or more people against another person or people", Keith Sullivan [3], in *The Anti-bullying Handbook*, addresses an issue that relates to my narrative because it regards gender. He informs us that females can be "hidden bullies". In contrast to the physically dominating males who terrorize playgrounds, hallways, gyms or locker rooms, using brute force to rule their physical fiefdoms, females rely on psychological weapons including isolation from the group, persistent teasing and spreading malicious rumors – just the strategies used against our woeful tutor. In answer to the question of how this bullying escaped my attention, Sullivan asserts that this sort of behavior is difficult to detect because it relies on snide, under the radar, out of earshot activity that he calls "bitch power".

To balance what might be seen as gender bias I looked to a female perspective, finding one with Jaana Juvonem and Sandra Graham [4] who, in the *Preface to Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized*, use a different term – "peer harassment" – to explain a relationship that I was now viewing with a different, more enlightened perspective. I like their term because it echoes our own use of the phrase "peer tutoring," causing me to become – much as I dislike admitting it – more open to the possibility of bullies having entered our writing center as writers qualified to tutor their fellow students. Juvonem and Graham define peer harassment as: "victimization that entails face-to-face confrontation (*e.g.* physical aggression, verbal abuse, nonverbal gesturing) or social manipulation through a third party (*e.g.* social ostracism, spreading rumors). The crucial element that distinguishes peer harassment from other types of negative encounters, such as conflict, is that there is an imbalance of power between perpetrator and target. Such asymmetric power relations can take many forms, such as when the physically strong bully the weak, numerical majorities intimidate numerical minorities, older youth harass younger targets, or the intellectually superior deride their less competent peers".

An application of their definition to my situation reveals that our tearful tutor was the victim of social manipulation and an asymmetric power relationship: she was outnumbered by the clique's members.

I read more and began to believe that not only was my tutor a victim of bullying, but that she was more specifically the victim of a form of harassment that Nicki Crick *et al.*, [5] in *Relational Victimization in Childhood and Adolescence: I Hurt You through the Grapevine*, call relational aggression. Because this sort of aggression is difficult to observe, it is "less likely than physical aggression to result in sanctions from authority figures". Certainly, if the harassed tutor had been the victim of a physical attack, then the situation's solution would have been clearly a matter for university officials to administer. But the bullying wasn't physical, with the exception of words whispered behind closed hands held to open ears.

Crick and her colleagues helped me understand why a mild-mannered tutor at long last came crying to me; they note that victims of this sort of harassment can "take on the role of both aggressor and victim". Though Crick *et al.* [5] note that victims "who are typically non-aggressive may sometimes be drawn into relationally aggressive interchanges", to apply this to my case, I believe that the bullied tutor finally became so tired, so fed up, so angry with her lot that she sought relief. Rather than confront her bullies, she angrily came to me, tearfully wanting me to do something.

By now I was beginning to understand; I believed that I had a grasp of the harassment that was occurring; I believed I knew why the beleaguered tutor came to me; I believed that I understood how I had unwittingly created the conditions for bullying with my "meerkat temperament" and my preference for tutors to project a professionally polite demeanor. What I wasn't sure about was how this group of female

tutors had formed a clique within an organization that I thought possessed its own non-threatening identity.

Sullivan [3] provides insight as he explains four steps in clique building. First, group members share common values and group norms. To relate this step to our situation, the clique members adopted a culture of complaint that valued negative criticism of, for example, writers seeking help. Tutors who disagreed with them – who did not share these negative values – were ostracized.

In Sullivan's second step, group members demand conformity. The second condition was met in a very small way. In our writing center, badges are worn to identify on-duty tutors. The clique members had made barely-observable deviations to the badges that made them conform to each other's, while apparently remaining like the rest of us. The addition of little gold stars was so small as to represent the kind of "under the radar" activity that Sullivan points out is difficult to detect. In fact, if it weren't for my research, I wouldn't have noticed it at all. Or, if I had noticed then I would probably have smilingly put the changes down to tutors expressing their individuality, an action that I am willing to tolerate.

Third, group members share an identity supported by feelings of superiority. This condition is fundamentally ingrained into our writing center. Though we are peer tutors, still writers come to us with the expectation that we are superior to them in some way, perhaps because we have taken a specific course from a particular professor and thus have the experience of writing for someone, or because we have experience reading similar essays. Because writers look up to us I could easily see how a feeling of superiority is shared by members of a clique.

Fourth, group members determine status; generally, a clique has a leader. This step was a bit more difficult to determine without confronting anyone. I had to observe clique members individually to see if one of them was a leader. Soon, I decided that there was a leader, a malcontent who resented the writing center experience as a burden. If not for the fact that her service was a programmatic requirement, I am certain that she would not have been a tutor.

Having identified this group as a clique, I began to see that they were often together in the writing center. Although they did not share the same schedule, individuals would gravitate to our space between classes, meeting their friends to engage in whispered conversations marked by giggling behind hands while looking at the tutors they were harassing. Here again I had created the conditions for victimization because I encourage off-duty tutors to congregate in the writing center with an eye toward assisting their peers when we were busy. I was trying to establish an altruistic atmosphere and it had been changed into something else.

So, I realized that I really did have bullies in the writing center, engaging in peer harassment. The next step was to decide what to do.

I must confess that my first impulse was to confront the clique, to show its members the results of my research both empirical and textual and to demand better behavior, the lack of which would lead to dire, even negative, consequences. I wanted to let them know that they had hurt people's feelings, that tears had been shed because of their vile actions and that I was aware of how bad they were; I wanted them to experience my deep disappointment in their behavior. But, I sublimated this impulse in favor of once again looking to more authoritative figures for suggestions as to how to resolve this situation. The primary solution was incredibly simple.

I found a common sense answer to my problem in Dan Olweus [6] who, in *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*, observes that – in school settings – the presence of adults leads to a decrease in bullying. I relocated his solution to my setting and simply increased my presence in the writing center. I reviewed the tutoring schedule to see when clique members were there and adjusted my schedule to accommodate theirs. Further, I looked to see when they were there on an unscheduled basis. Following the solution offered by Olweus, I was there when they were there, providing the adult presence advocated by this expert on bullying.

Then, I went beyond Olweus by addressing Sullivan's four steps in clique building, reckoning that I could become a clique buster. To begin,

I worked to restore the writing center's norms and values. I not only appeared when the troublesome clique assembled, I also sat among them, engaging them in conversation, pointing out the things that on-duty tutors were doing well, complimenting and praising the objects of their snipey phrases in ways that would allow these bullies to see that there was obviously something commendable about their victims. I asked them questions about their programmatic and professional goals and solicited advice about how our writing center could help them achieve these goals. I also praised and complimented each clique member assuring everyone that I was omnipresent and eager to serve as a source of recommendations for programs and professional positions. Above all, I was an energetic advocate of values shared and practiced by tutors in our writing center.

To account for Sullivan's second step – conformity – I went to the bin where we store badges and added stars to everyone's ID, so that we all wore stars. This strategy fulfilled two purposes: 1. it non-verbally informed clique members that I was aware that they had altered their badges, and 2. it restored common identification so that we all once more conformed to a group identity.

The third step was a bit more difficult to address because a sense of superiority may be a motivating factor in some peers' tutoring, enabling them to assert a pro-active attitude in solving writing problems. Here, however, I reminded tutors of my belief that writers often have the solutions to their dilemmas within themselves. This support of active listening can lead to a sense of humility as tutors recall that they may not always be the most important person in a tutoring situation, that the writer is also very important.

Sullivan's fourth step was addressed over time. Eventually what happened, I believe, is that I supplanted the leader of the clique by restoring the writing center's values as the norm for all of us; I replaced their alternative values by reminding these bullies of our more appropriate ones, promising them the rewards that accompany conforming to a more desirable mission, offering group members the choice of rejoining the writing center, with our *esprit de corps* and meerkat attitude. Though it took a

while, by the end of the semester the clique dissipated as some members began to help their peers even when off duty, allowing me to write in their evaluations that they demonstrated an exemplary work ethic; others began to "team tutor" with former victims of their harassment, allowing their perception of superiority to be put to good use as they collaborated in helping problematic writers.

When I began to spend more time in our writing center, bullying exited, tears ceased, civility returned. Now, years afterward, with all the characters in this drama graduated, leading lives elsewhere, I can reflect upon this experience. On reflection, I see three lessons learned, three lessons worth sharing.

1. Bullies *can* enter the writing center. They can be outsiders or they can be insiders, but they can be in here among us.
2. Politeness can be mistaken for weakness. We can project a cooperative attitude and proffer a friendly helping hand to everyone, yet some people will regard this as an opportunity to bully us.
3. Be ever vigilant. Though I was reluctant to address the issue, I did so; and, having done so, I am well aware that if it happened once then it can happen again.

References

1. "Bullying." *Youth Violence*. Center for Disease Control. 2010. Web. 4 Mar 2011.
2. Schuster, Beate. "Rejection and Victimization by Peers: Social Perception and Social Behavior Mechanisms." *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized.* Eds. Jaana Juvonem and Sandra Graham. New York: Guilford. 2001. Print.
3. Sullivan, Keith. *The Anti-bullying Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. Print, p. 9.
4. Juvonem, Jaana and Sandra Graham. "Preface." *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Vicitmized*. Eds. Jaana Juvonem and Sandra Graham. New York: Guilford, 2001. Print. p. XIII.
5. Crick, Nicki R., *et al.* "Relational Victimization in Childhood and Adolescence: I Hurt You through the Grapevine." *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized.* Eds. Jaana Juvonem and Sandra Graham. New York: Guilford, 2001. Print, pp. 210, 211.
6. Olweus, Dan. *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993. Print.

Endnotes

1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs – from which "safe and secure" is taken – is a foundation of our writing center. I've adapted the more commonly-found five levels to include two I believe are appropriate to our mission (#5 and 6), so that I look to this list of seven needs: 1. basic needs, including the need for food and shelter – here, though it's a little thing, we offer snacks and "smart pills" (candy) to students who enter our writing center; 2. the need for safety and security – here we create an atmosphere of enablement, where mistakes are not only tolerated but expected as a necessary part of writing; 3. the need for community – we want writers to become members of our academic community; 4. the need for self-esteem – meeting this need helps to breed independent writers; 5. the need for understanding – this motivates clear communication on the part of our writers so that their audience can comprehend their essays; 6. the need for aesthetics – this helps explain why we should study subjects such as literature; and, 7. the need for self-actualization – I selfishly point to this need as a major reason why I enjoy my work in our writing center. As may be seen, I've revised Maslow's words to meet my needs.