

Centering in the Borderlands: Lessons from Hispanic Student Writers

by Beatrice Mendez Newman

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"

As a metaphor for writing center work, carnival frames this work as, to borrow Susan Miller's words, a "relation between high and low discourses," in this case, between frequently marginalized writing centers and the larger university or academic 'structures' that contain—and depend on—these centers.

(Petit 42)

In Chapter 1 of *Noise from the Writing Center*, Elizabeth Boquet examines the metaphors used in reference to writing centers—clinic, laboratory, center, workshop—and connects these metaphors to perceptions of the writing center's place in the institution. Her own metaphor, noise, situates the writing center as a vibrant component of the institution with the capacity for having a significant impact on a student's journey through the academy. In drawing connections among the writing center's label, locale, and function, Boquet continues the discussion begun in Nancy Grimm's *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. For Grimm, the writing center is far more than a campus location and an institutional unit: she sees the writing center as an agent for institutional change particularly in the institution's response to difference, to alternative discourses, and to non-mainstream literacy. Angela Petit's metaphor—the writing center as carnival where "normal rules, authorities, and boundaries do not disappear but are temporarily relaxed or

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inverted” (43)—fits comfortably with Grimm’s and Boquet’s observations about the apparent disruption that writing centers create for institutional authority. Boquet, Grimm, and Petit focus our attention on the way that writing centers work both as partners and as “adversaries” to traditional institutional structures particularly in our work with students who in any way deviate from the “norm.” Such students could be non-traditional, non-mainstream, foreign, at-risk, disabled, or ethnically and linguistically different from the “typical” (competently and confidently literate, well-prepared) student. Yeats’ couplet provides the metaphor I would like to adapt for my discussion of the way that writing centers help institutions respond to a particular type of non-mainstream student: the Hispanic student at borderlands institutions, institutions on the U.S.-Mexican border in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.¹ Boquet writes about noise, Petit about carnival, Grimm about agency—types of disruptions in the institutional status quo that cast the writing center as a challenge to the norm, as an inducer of a sort of institutional “anarchy.” For the students I will focus on in this discussion, usual types of institutional “centers”—the classroom, the professor’s office, advisors, etc.—do not “hold.” In fact, as these writers have pointed out, the very component that disrupts institutional norms—the writing center—is what helps borderlands Hispanic students center themselves in the institution.

Writing center scholarship has examined interactions with several types of non-mainstream students—ESL students, learning disabled students, physically disabled students, members of non-Anglo ethnic groups, and non-traditional students (Edlund; Neff-Lippman; DiPardo; Powers; Neff; Friedlander; Powers; Gardner, Lyman, and McLean). Little has been written, however, about Hispanic students and writing centers, and nothing has been written about Hispanic students at writing centers in borderlands institutions. These students fit neither the traditional ESL nor non-traditional student definition², yet they pose specific challenges to writing center workers at borderlands institutions and at institutions in other parts of the country where these students are recruited in an effort to diversify student bodies. For borderlands Hispanic students—whether they attend borderlands institutions or institutions in other parts of the country—the writing center offers, in a twist of Yeats’ phrase, a “center that holds,” an agency that helps them understand and join in the conversation of the academy.

Statistics: Hispanic Student Populations at Borderlands Institutions

Given the recently released U.S. Census Bureau figures showing that Hispanics are now the nation’s largest minority group (numbering 37 million compared to 36.2 million African-Americans [Clemetson; U.S. Census Bureau]), this is an appropriate time to

examine how writing centers respond to the special educational needs of Hispanic students. There are no “historically Hispanic” institutions in the United States (as there are historically Black institutions); instead, institutions with Hispanic student enrollments of 25% or more are designated by the U.S. Department of Education as “Hispanic-serving” institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, “Completions”). My comments and observations are based on my experiences with students at The University of Texas-Pan American, whose 89% Hispanic enrollment (10,950 Hispanic students in a 12,569-member student body) positions it at the top of four-year, Hispanic-serving borderlands institutions.³ The University of Texas-El Paso, another borderlands institution, stands just below UTPA with a 77% Hispanic enrollment, 10,005 Hispanic students in a 14,695-member student body (National Center for Education Statistics, “Completions”).

An important aspect of my ability to conduct a discussion on Hispanic students at borderlands institutions is the fact that I am Hispanic: I grew up in a borderlands area, attended a borderlands institution for my undergraduate work, and, after venturing into areas beyond the borderlands for my graduate degrees, I have been privileged with opportunities to work with students who remind me of myself when I was their age. My interpretation of the academic conduct of Hispanic borderlands students is based on first-hand, personal experience reinforced by years of watching students work as hard as I did—at their age—to find a place in academia.

Hispanic students at borderlands institutions have been overlooked in part because many of the instructional and support staff at such institutions simply do not know enough about these students to understand how their academic experiences are affected by home-life, culture, and limited fluency in the institution’s dominant language. The students at the center of this article are of Mexican descent (at least one parent is of Mexican origin; their strong cultural and familial ties “interfere” with academic expectations and situate them in borderland institutions within driving distance of their homes rather than at institutions far removed from their home environment). Because they do not leave their homes and families to attend college, the family creates a special type of on-going “interference” with their assimilation into the academy. (Let me provide an example: I have a student in one of my classes right now who missed three consecutive classes recently. He told me, although I did not ask him the reason for his absences, that his grandmother was in the hospital and, since his mother does not drive, he took care of getting his mother to and from the hospital. For Hispanic students, such situations do not create a dilemma; when family calls, the call must be answered regardless of academic obligations. A professor unfamiliar with Hispanic culture might see this behavior as academically irresponsible and see the family

connection as “interference” in the quest for academic success when in fact the behavior is a manifestation of the student’s identification with family.) Because their parents have minimal levels of education, only functional literacy in Spanish and English, and literally no urgency to assimilate into the American culture, borderlands Hispanic children acquire neither English nor Spanish at a level of competence that could classify them as literate in either language.

For many borderlands students, literacy in English develops in school settings and is not reinforced in homes where grandparents, parents, other relatives, and family friends speak some version of border Spanish; where books, newspapers, and other reading materials are rare; and where family comes above everything else—including school attendance and school work. Thus, when these students arrive at borderlands institutions, they lack the literacy skills to succeed in college, and because they are still tethered to families with whom they continue to live (as opposed to moving into the far-from-home-on-campus-dorm-living-environment), they are unable to acculturate themselves into university life. Instead, they feel the pull of every family situation and/or crisis far more urgently than they feel the responsibility of showing up in class or completing class assignments.

An added wrinkle in the academic tapestry is the fact that national statistics about teenage moms are realities in our borderlands university classrooms. It is not at all unusual at my institution for at least one quarter of the 18-20 year-olds in freshman classes to be parents (usually single parents) of one or more children. So, whether the family “interference” comes from parents and siblings or from their own children, many students at borderlands institutions cannot privilege education above family responsibility. Acknowledging this situation does not require that we approve of it; we just need to understand that family is a significant disruption in a borderland student’s attempt to achieve a college education.

The aggressively bicultural ambience of borderlands communities cancels the pragmatic effectiveness of the “total immersion” approach to assimilating into a different/“dominant” culture. Borderlands businesses require employees who regularly interact with customers to speak Spanish and English. Service workers are almost exclusively Mexican citizens or Hispanic Americans with little or no knowledge of English. (Those of us who live on the border know that we must be proficient enough in Spanish to deal with plumbers, waiters and waitresses, gardeners, carpenters, and other workers on whom we rely daily.) But the mix of cultures seems to work politically, socially, and economically. U.S. borderlands communities celebrate Mexican holidays like Cinco de Mayo (May 5, the day Mexican soldiers overthrew Maximilian’s French forces), Diez y Seis de Septiembre (September

16, Mexican Independence Day), and Dia de los Muertos (November 1, Day of the Dead). Easter, Christmas, and New Year's take on Hispanic touches in borderlands communities, with *cascarones* (dyed egg shells filled with confetti) being as popular as traditional hard boiled Easter eggs; *luminarias* (small paper bags—or these days, empty milk jugs—partly filled with sand to hold lit candles) lining sidewalks at Christmas; and *buñuelos* (paper thin, fried pastries dusted with sugar and cinnamon) more common than black-eyed peas on New Year's Day.

Then there are social expectations and regulations. Mexican parents teach their children to be extremely respectful of authority: grandparents, parents, and other authority figures are always addressed in the formal second person (*usted*—roughly equivalent to addressing an authority figure as “Sir” or “Ma’am”). Girls are expected to cater to male relatives, to observe curfews, and to learn to do housework so that they can take care of a husband when the time comes. In many Hispanic borderland families, a high school education is considered a terminal degree, and going on to college is viewed as delayed entry into the workforce. Hispanic young people are expected to contribute to the household; when they have jobs, part of their salary goes into the family coffers, no questions asked. When Hispanic students from lower socio-economic homes enroll in college, financial support from the family is limited or non-existent.

It is out of this milieu that Hispanic students at borderlands institutions emerge, and it necessarily impacts their ability to integrate themselves successfully into the institutional setting. This is where the writing center comes in—not as a solution to all the problems of Hispanic borderlands students but as an agent of access to the institution and to the avenues of success and acceptance an institution of higher education represents.

Lessons from Hispanic Students: Rosa, Dahlia, and Leo

In many ways, writing centers at borderlands institutions provide the “center” that Hispanic students need in order to hold on to the institution. Borderlands Hispanic students, like non-traditional, non-mainstream students at universities and colleges throughout the country, lack strategies for negotiating an institutional environment dominated by traditional mainstream authority, a lack of preparedness exacerbated by literacy problems and by insufficient support mechanisms from the institution. Although addressing the problems of non-traditional students in writing centers, Eric Gardner's observation that “to lots of educators [non-traditional students] have been invisible” (7) aptly describes the presence of the Hispanic student in borderlands institutions, an invisibility

sustained by institutional reluctance (?), inability (?), failure (?) to adapt traditional educational practices to the needs of changing student populations.

Narratives about specific non-mainstream students have shown writing center workers how we can better serve our clients by listening and noting the problems they face as they try to integrate themselves into the institution (DiPardo's Fannie, Grimm's Joe, Boquet's Todd ["Disciplinary Action"]). I would like to add the voices of some of my writing center students to Fannie's, Joe's, and Todd's voices. Rosa, Dahlia, and Leo—students with whom I worked at my writing center—are excellent representative examples of how a writing center at a borderlands institution can help Hispanic students position themselves in the institution when traditional means for such centering have proved ineffective. Rosa's, Dahlia's, and Leo's stories show how writing centers can be advocates of students whose voices are ignored (or not even heard) by traditional institutional entities.

Rosa

Rosa brought me graded Freshman English essays that included error counts (30 in one essay, 31 in another, 33 in the next, etc.) and sarcastic comments—"Don't you know how to write a thesis???"—but never any encouraging comments about what she was doing right or how to improve her next essay. Despite my insistence that she arrange a conference with her instructor, she refused to approach him. To a traditional instructor, Rosa was resistant to strategies intended to foster communication between student and professor. To a writing center director who works daily with students with strong ties to their Hispanic culture, Rosa was acting in the way dictated by her culture: she had to accept her authoritative instructor's judgment about her writing even though she knew that her writing was far more competent than the steady stream of D's indicated.

Working with Rosa required far more than knowing how to help her become a better writer. Her papers had numerous language use errors but none which significantly interfered with her message. As I looked over the graded papers she brought me, I could tell that the instructor had violated all principles of effective response to student writing. Instead of using his comments to "guide learning," he was offering snide comments and apparently demonstrating his prowess as an error-hunter (Lindemann 230). Writing in *Response to Student Writing*, Sarah Warshauer Freedman points out that response to student writing should be "collaborative problem-solving" with the responder guiding the student writer toward increased competence and toward independence from the instructor/responder (7). For Rosa, her instructor's response was making her increasingly dependent, not on

her instructor but on writing center tutors, and she was losing confidence in her writing competence.

My response to Rosa was two-fold: first, I worked with her to identify areas of competence in her writing. Rosa's instructor had failed to acknowledge to what extent she had fulfilled the requirements of the assignment. Every one of Rosa's papers did in fact have a thesis: her instructor required that she underline the thesis and topic sentences in every essay. And, objectively, I could point out to her that every thesis statement, every topic sentence met the requirements of such structures. All of her essays were appropriately and effectively developed. The only recurring problems were language use and grammar errors that stemmed from her Spanish language background, and these relatively superficial errors became the focus of the instructor's evaluation. When Rosa worked in the writing center with plenty of time to produce multiple drafts, she could write effectively. However, her instructor required that all essays be written in class in a 55-minute period; unfortunately, he did not allow students to work from a draft. By focusing on the errors, her instructor had caused Rosa to feel not incompetent but hopeless: she knew that her classroom instructor would never acknowledge that she had any understanding of essay format, unity, voice, development, or audience awareness since all he noticed was the errors.

The second part of my response to Rosa dealt with training my tutors to handle similar situations. Clearly, Rosa needed much more than "help with commas." So I held a training session in which I showed tutors how to help students like Rosa, whose instructors had failed to use effective response strategies, to recognize what works in their writing. While tutors cannot possibly respond the way instructors do to student writing, we can recognize that tutoring is in fact a type of response. To move students toward independence as writers, we need to inspire confidence in them about their own writing. Thus, saying, "I see you've written a thesis that clearly states your topic and that asserts a point you can defend throughout the paper" may work better than saying, "Can you show me where your thesis is?" The declarative statement shows the insecure student writer that we recognize his/her competence; the question suggests that there might not be a thesis in the paper, and even if the student thinks he/she wrote a thesis, the question leads to second guessing and to diminishing confidence.

I did not help Rosa earn higher grades in freshman English, but I did serve as a centering mechanism for her: by the end of the semester, she realized that her impending failure in freshman English did not mean she was a failure as a writer or as a student. The following semester she came back, smiling and confident, to tell me how well she was doing in her second attempt at freshman English. I had advised her to enroll in a class conducted in a

computer lab where the instructor conferenced with students as they worked and where multiple drafts and peer conferencing defined the approach to writing.

Dahlia

Dahlia did attempt a student-teacher conference but could not find her political science professor during his office hours. When she lingered after class to speak to him, she was dismissed with unspecific, unsubstantiated encouragement—"Don't worry; you'll do all right"—despite the consistent low C's on her essays. As a young Hispanic woman, Dahlia's academic involvement was regulated by her husband's work schedule and by the demands of her toddler, so she had very limited opportunity to seek out her instructor for individual conferencing. Although our writing center does not have synchronous conferencing or any type of formalized, online conferencing, I encouraged her to send me her drafts via email. We exchanged emails throughout the semester following several visits to the writing center: she sent me her drafts; I embedded comments in her text designed to direct her toward her instructor's expectations and focused on helping her achieve clarity and logic in her writing. Working with Dahlia "after hours" on my own time called for a type of disruption: because of her deadlines and family responsibilities, I had to make time for email tutoring late at night or very early in the morning while I was at home. She did not consult me as she finalized her last essay for this class; instead, she sent me an email message saying she felt good about her writing now and could complete the paper on her own.

Dahlia's role as a mother and wife obviously superseded her role as student, but a student like Dahlia must be able to find an entity somewhere on campus that does not penalize or criticize her for that choice. She came to our writing center because her professor was inaccessible during his posted office hours, because his written evaluation of her writing did not match his expressed optimism regarding her chances for success, and because she genuinely wanted to improve her writing. In working with Dahlia, I again had to compensate for what the instructor failed to do. Like Rosa, Dahlia's "writing problems" extended to areas beyond her writing: she felt that her professor's inaccessibility was hurting her chances for success in that course. Not only did contact with our writing center help her improve as a writer, it also helped her develop confidence as a student in the institution.

Leo

Leo was writing a research paper on the death penalty. His freshman English instructor had turned the pedagogically powerful individual conference into an opportunity for disparaging his students' efforts. Leo told me that as he and about five other students waited in the hall for their research paper conferences, he grew increasingly nervous: "We could

hear him, and all he was telling the students was how bad the papers were.” He showed up at the writing center convinced his paper was worthless. With Leo, my task was to help him understand what his instructor meant by a lack of coherence as well as to help him develop confidence as a writer. (At my first session with Leo, he was despondent over his inability to please his instructor.) Unlike Rosa, Leo did go back to his instructor, but he came back to the writing center still puzzled about what was wrong with his paper. Initially, I took a non-directive approach: I asked Leo what he wanted to say about the death penalty, how he could back up his position, what evidence he had to support it, etc. Then I ventured into more directive tutoring: I had him write a new outline that began with a thesis statement (elicited after I pointedly asked him to state in one sentence the most important thing he wanted to say about the death penalty) supported by several sections that the instructor would recognize as evidence for the thesis.

Leo was one of many students with whom I’ve worked who need a somewhat “visual deconstruction” of the writing they have produced. After he wrote his outline, I sat at a computer with him and showed him how to use the highlight feature on Microsoft Word to match what he had written to specific sections of his outline. For example, I helped him find everything related to death row inmates who were later proved innocent, and I had him computer highlight all those sentences in one color. Everything related to the death penalty in other countries was highlighted in a different color, etc., etc. By the time our conference ended, Leo thoroughly understood that “lack of coherence” was not an insurmountable problem (plus he had a very colorful draft!). I helped him see his draft as a text that was disorganized but which could be “fixed” with the cut-and-paste editing tools. The despondence with which he had entered the writing center was replaced with enthusiasm to cut and paste sections of his text to achieve coherence.

In response to my experience with Leo, I devoted a tutor-training session to recognizing the features of effective writing (significance, unity, clarity, economy of language, grammatical acceptability, vigor, and authentic voice) as presented in Maxine Hairston’s *Successful Writing* (7-15). I taught our tutors how to talk about global writing concerns with clients and how to “salvage” papers such as Leo’s, in other words, to recognize what works in the paper and to give the clients terminology for discussing their writing.

At the end of the semester, I received this email message from Leo:

This is Leo, the guy you helped out with the death penalty paper. Just writing to say thanks and to tell you how I did. I was sort of disappointed because I got an 80, and that’s because he had given me a 70 but changed it, I guess he knew how hard I worked on it. I was expecting like an 85 or 90 but not an 80. He wrote some comments I can’t even understand. Thanx A lot I appreciate it.

Through his visits to the writing center, Leo learned more than how to organize his material. Leo's message suggests he approached his instructor ("he had given me a 70 but changed it") and negotiated a higher grade for his essay because he felt confident about the work he had produced, a confidence which, I believe, he developed as a result of his contact with the writing center.

Rosa, Dahlia, and Leo are evidence that, at borderlands institutions, our contacts with Hispanic students in the writing center extend far beyond their writing competence. Although they show up at the writing center to improve their writing ("I just need help with my commas"), before long, their conversations turn into conversations about instructors that seem oblivious to the academic barriers Hispanic borderlands students face. In the process of working with their writing, we help students learn to negotiate those academic barriers. Although they have been allowed entry into the institution, they lack strategies and resources for ensuring their academic success.

When family upbringing, social expectations, acknowledgment of authority, and marginal entry into a traditional academic environment come together in the university setting, Hispanic students find themselves in antagonistic relationships with traditional institutional structures; in other words, they find that traditional academic centering mechanisms "will not hold." In an article that articulates the problems of Hispanic students in academia with a depth of analysis heretofore unseen in scholarly discussions of these students, Michelle Hall Kells writes:

The failure to recognize the fine linguistic and ethnic distinctions of Mexican-origin individuals has hastened the exodus of culturally and linguistically complex students from the American educational system. Furthermore, the language attitudes, myths, and polarizing biases reflected in the college English classroom constitute a potentially alienating domain. (16)

Kells' discussion focuses on the composition classroom, but her assessment of the obstacles, lack of understanding, and student response to such problems reinforces my assertion that Hispanic students at borderlands institutions must seek alternative avenues to success once they have gained nominal entry into the institution. The "exodus . . . from the American educational system" does not have to occur if students find centering mechanisms that provide the support they need to negotiate academia successfully.

Faced with impending academic defeat, students seek the safety of a "borderland," a term that Carol Severino applies to writing centers. She writes,

[T]he writing center's mission is a borderland one—to help students articulate the cultural and rhetorical similarities and differences they observe and confront; to help them 'grapple with' or negotiate between and among intersecting and clashing cul-

tures, languages, literacies, discourses, and disciplines; to help them decide when to follow organizational and stylistic conventions . . . and when to take risks and violate them—instead of being violated by them. (231)

“Borderland” takes on a particularly appropriate application for writing centers at institutions on the border: our students live both on the metaphorical borderland that Severino describes and on a geographical borderland (the U.S.-Mexico border) where cultural dictates significantly influence student-teacher interactions and their assimilation into the academic community.

Lisa Gonsalves’ recent study of interactions between Black male students and white faculty points to some of the same issues that impact the academic experiences of Hispanic borderlands students. Gonsalves identifies interactions over student writing as “the first, and sometimes only contact between faculty and student” (437) and connects the success of such interactions to retention. This study of writing conference narratives provided by white faculty and Black male students shows how both parties’ misunderstandings contribute to non-productive student-teacher interactions, misunderstandings exacerbated by cross-racial differences in communication styles. Gonsalves ends with suggestions for increasing faculty awareness of ethnic and cultural issues so as to improve students’ educational experiences. However, the solution to the problem seems to rest with the faculty: what happens when institutions do not sanction initiatives to improve cross-cultural communication in student-faculty transactions? Students fail, students drop out, students have less than productive academic experiences—unless they find ways to overcome obstacles created by faculty who are non-responsive to ethnic difference.

Pedagogically, writing centers fill gaps created when Hispanic borderlands students lack the strategies and confidence to function productively in an academic environment. Students who are ill-prepared for academic life and who see teachers as “authorities” that are not to be challenged use neither conferencing nor classroom interactions productively. Even when educators try to impose the new paradigm Xin Liu Gale describes in *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom*—inviting student interaction through collaborative activities, through conferencing with the professor, through teaching approaches that make the professor a member of a learning community rather than the dispenser of authority—Hispanic students have difficulties participating because of their culturally-ingrained respect for authority. Hispanic students from Mexican families—in which age, experience, and position establish authority—cannot position themselves as members of a community of learners in a college classroom. On the other hand, when they sit in classrooms in which the professor chooses a traditional lecturer-listener

approach, Hispanic students do not ask questions lest they be considered resistant to the teacher's authority. Neither do they approach professors during office hours, fearing that they are "disturbing" the professor during his/her "time off."

When Hispanic borderlands students show up at the writing center, they find the encouraging environment created by tutors and other staff a welcome contrast to the authoritative environments of the traditional classroom and the instructor's office. The one-on-one contact, the effort to find in their writing what is effective, the learner-centered discussion of what could be changed to improve the writing enables Hispanic borderlands students to envision themselves as members of the academic culture. In short, writing centers are places where barriers to institutional access are eliminated or at least significantly reduced: in Irene Clark's words, they are "comfortable, non-threatening places for learning" (7). When those barriers are significantly reduced—as they are at writing centers—students can concentrate on the real work of being in the academy: accessing knowledge, enhancing skills and competencies, and sustaining the quest for knowledge that originally brought them to the institution.

Writing Center Work and Hispanic Students: The Center Holds

The responsibility of guaranteeing safe passage through the institution for historically underprivileged Hispanic students should not fall solely on the shoulders of writing center workers, but I do believe that we are in a position to make that passage less turbulent, less traumatic, and less damaging. It's time to come back to all the metaphors I began with: carnival, clinic, laboratory, nois(y) site—and my metaphor: the center that can hold. The writing center is uniquely positioned to help Hispanic borderlands students find a center that enables them to "hold" on to institutional expectations, to meet institutional requirements, to exit the institution with the skills and knowledge to be productive citizens of America.

To help writing centers work as centers that hold, I offer the following guidelines for working with Hispanic students, with the caveat that even when they manage to leave the borderlands, Hispanic borderlands students retain their borderlands orientation, so these guidelines can help writing centers in all parts of the country.

Guideline 1: Recognize the types of writing produced by Hispanic borderlands students and "deconstruct" what the writer has done in order to help him/her move to higher levels of literacy. At the outset, we need to acknowledge that the writing of borderlands students is not ESL writing. These students do not fit the usual second-language acquisition paradigm, where the speaker moves gradually from the native language through interlanguages

toward the target language and where the speaker—or writer—“monitors” constructions to ensure comprehensible output (Edlund 206-209; Krashen 21) because their “native” language is usually a mixture of Spanish and English that exists only in oral form. Edlund’s application of Krashen’s monitor is on target when the speaker metacognitively evaluates and filters output, but such awareness requires significant understanding of the grammar of both the native language and the target language. I know that when I am trying to speak in Spanish, I am very aware of the grammatical structures I am producing, of the not-quite right accent, of the mispronunciation of certain constructions, of the significantly slower pace at which I speak compared to a native speaker—all evidence that I am using Krashen’s and Edlund’s monitor. However, the students I am writing about lack facility in English and Spanish; thus, there is no monitor for them. When Hispanic borderlands students start school, they are acquiring a formal language for the first time, and language use problems persist through college because of the lack of reinforcement for the new language (English) that they receive at home. (As I pointed out earlier, their parents don’t read either English or Spanish publications, and Spanish, usually some version of border Spanish, is the language spoken by parents, grandparents, family friends, and the students’ peers.) Thus, English, for many borderlands students, is exclusively the language of school, and because they can function economically, socially, and personally with limited mastery of English, their motivation to become fully literate in English is low. As John Edlund explains it, “Another way to look at the issue of motivation is to say that the input must not only be comprehensible, but also socially meaningful. An individual may live and work in an environment rich in input in the second language, but if this potential input is defined as being directed toward some social group the individual does not belong to, it may not be attended to” (207). Many Hispanic borderlands students literally learn only enough English to get by in school. This should be an important consideration for us as we work with these students in our writing centers.

The errors seen in the writing of borderlands students are so numerous that they can easily overwhelm a tutor: it is easy to conclude—erroneously—that such writers know nothing about English. For example, the following excerpt from an essay written by Esteban presents challenges for writing center workers that simply do not exist when we work with students who have developed literacy in their native language and whose grammatical knowledge in that language can be used to build their literacy in English. The prompt was to describe a memorable meal:

My mom was just putting the new roof in our house. We just had come from Illinois we were working to help my mom make some money. For she could pay the work of

the persons who were going to do the new roof in our house and for she could buy all the materiel that we were going to need for the roof. It was November and it was cool almost thanksgiving day and my brothers and me decided to work for the person who was doing the roof of our house he used to give us \$40 dollar per day. We knew that we were not going to have a turkey for Thanksgiving Day that year because we were going to be working. Three of my ants won a turkey each one on a raffle that they went in on the television they were giving away 48 turkeys on those day and my ants were ones of the 48 persons who won a turkeys those day. . . . My mom was going to do some eggs with beans for dinner again but my ants call my mom and told her not to do anything so we thought my mom was mad with us and she was not going to do our dinner for that night. But my brother and me were just thinking about how to go sleep with all the hungers we had and we were too tired to do something to eat. My ants finally go to the house with the turkeys we were on a room but we could smell the good of the turkey. (Newman)

This is one of those passages that evokes a dual response in a tutor: on one hand, the tutor (in this case, me) is saying to herself, "Wow! There are so many errors in this that I don't know where to begin. Can I do anything to help this writer? How do I keep from making him feel that almost every word, every phrase is an error, that his writing is worthless?" On the other hand, the tutor can get a grip and say to herself, "Okay. I need to hear what the writer is trying to say even if I don't understand the 'rules' behind his writing. Esteban needs to leave our session understanding how to turn his writing into a text his instructor will understand and accept."

I read through the paper to get a sense of Esteban's rhetorical intentions and then suggested we work on structure and rhetoric first and worry about language on the next draft. I was forthright with him: I told him that he had language use errors in every sentence and that he would be demoralized if we attempted to identify every error. I showed Esteban how to build and maintain suspense for his surprise ending (the fact that his aunts had won a turkey and shared the meal with his family, which in his first draft he had given away almost immediately). I did what writing center pedagogy advocates: I praised the student for what he had accomplished (I told him it was a great story) and showed him how to make the text ready for a reader. I had him write notes in the margins of his draft to ensure that he would remember what we were saying about his writing, particularly the global aspects. I had him highlight in different colors the parts of the essay related to the problem (no money for a Thanksgiving meal), the "build up" (he and his brother were working on the roof to help their mom), the surprise ending (his aunt had won a turkey in a raffle), the description of the meal (family and friends gathered around the table on a symbolic occasion). Once he realized he could cut-and-paste chunks of his writing to achieve a more effective rhetori-

cal order, we began addressing the language use problems, which at that point seemed relatively minor to him given his grasp of the global problems in the essay.

Esteban's essay is a "worst case scenario" for writing center workers who interact with Hispanic students. My next excerpt illustrates structures and practices common in Hispanic borderlands student writing. The task was to write a short summary of a *National Geographic* article on sharks:

- (1) Scientist have made studies on the great white to find that they are not we think they are but just themselves. (2) An author by the name Peter Benchley wrote a book called *Jaws* saying that this creatures like to eat us humans but actually it's just the mistake that the sharks does, confusing us for his real prey . . . (6) Now that they learn more about sharks are interested on the life of the creature. (Newman)

This passage demonstrates several relatively "common" errors seen in the texts of Hispanic borderlands students who are not directly translating but are being influenced by structures that they hear in their oral border Spanish language. (Recall my earlier point that Hispanic borderlands students are fluent neither in Spanish nor English and thus cannot rely on strong grammatical knowledge of either language to moderate their constructions in writing.) In sentence 1, *made* substitutes for the all-purpose Spanish *hacer*, a verb that can mean, among many things, make, have, hold, commit. Sentence 2, although only a Spanish speaker would know this, uses *does* as a different form of the verb *made* in sentence 1. Sentence 2 also shows the influence of inflections in Spanish: *sharks does* in Spanish would be *tiburones hacen* with both the noun and the verb inflected with plural markers (-es for the noun and -en for the verb), where in English only the noun has an obvious plural marker. Also in sentence 2, this is not a pronoun error; it is a phonetics error: in Spanish, *i* is pronounced like the long *e* in English. Thus, for someone whose language is influenced by Spanish phonetics, these and this are indistinguishable sounds. Finally, in Sentence 6, the verb choices show a common phenomenon (error) among speakers of Spanish: because Spanish is an inflected and completely conjugated language, the verb frequently includes the subject; thus, there is no need for the Spanish speaker to reiterate the pronoun subject. For this writer, *are*, the verb in the main clause, includes the pronoun subject *they* as it would in a Spanish version of this construction.

Because of my knowledge of Spanish, I can actually contrast the construction the student shows in the writing to what he or she intended. However, tutors who do not know Spanish can still explain the cause of the error (much the way I do when I work with Japanese, Middle Eastern, or Russian students). When syntactic constructions are extremely aberrant, we can guess that certain, incorrect structures are influenced by the students' knowl-

edge of another language and use that hypothesis to help the writer become aware of such potential pitfalls in future writing.

Guideline 2: Adopt a more directive approach to tutoring. Because of their limited facility with English, borderlands Hispanic students frequently do not respond well to non-directive tutoring. Thus, asking questions aimed at helping the writer decipher problems in a text leads to frustration and to the student's suspicion that tutors are "withholding information" about grammar and writing. I discovered very early in my work with Hispanic borderlands students at the writing center that they do not feel comfortable with questions such as "What are you trying to say here?" They do not understand why, when they finally approach an institutional representative (the writing center tutor), that authority figure "refuses" to help. I frequently got responses such as "I don't know." While directive tutoring may violate a writing center's objective to help writers develop independence, sometimes the special conditions of the writer's situation warrant a temporary departure from non-directive tutoring. For example, instead of asking what the writer intended to convey through certain constructions, I describe what he/she seems to be saying and explain why that message is not getting across, and I help the writer construct sentences in a more appropriate form. Or, let's say the writer is having difficulty maintaining consistent verb tense, a far more common problem among borderlands Hispanic students than it is in mainstream student writing. One thing I've done in this situation is to have the student highlight all the verbs in a short passage (sometimes I have to help the student figure out which are the verbs). Then I'll ask the student to notice the form of the verbs and to notice context clues that he or she has included to mark the time as past, present, or future.

I certainly am not suggesting that we simply tell the student what the problem is and how it can be corrected. Neither am I suggesting that we create situations where writing center clients become dependent on our tutorial help. Judith Powers discusses the pragmatics of adopting directive tutoring techniques with ESL writers because they lack sufficient discourse and linguistic knowledge to respond well to a non-directive approach (370-373). My suggestion stems from the Hispanic student's cultural directives that require they assume a quiet, passive role in learning. It is very difficult for a student who has been taught to revere his teachers and to respect authority (even a "psuedo" authority figure such as a writing center tutor) to be assertive about what he/she wants to do in a piece of writing. Imposing a non-directive approach on such students is risky: rather than endure a tutor's well-intentioned questioning, they will simply quit coming to the writing center—an outcome that I have witnessed far too many times.

Guideline 3: Remember the context from which Hispanic borderlands students' academic problems emerge. Most borderlands Hispanic students sense their marginalized status in the institution. They cannot participate in the day-to-day life of the institution because of the family responsibilities they have. When I realize that a student's writing problems are due to family-related limitations, I try to "teach" the student strategies for success as I tutor. I might say something like, "These are good sources, but notice that you can't use this source because you didn't jot down all the bibliographical information you need. You don't have time to go back and get the information you need for this source, so why don't you find something similar in a source that is complete." When a student brings in a draft that needs more than a 15-minute "quick fix," I point out areas that we could have worked on if we had more time, but I make clear to the student that I am willing to do what we can in the short time we have before the paper is due: "Okay, we have only a few minutes, so I'll just help you make sure that you get rid of the really noticeable problems. If we had a bit more time, we could work on your sentences to make your paper sound more sophisticated. But perhaps we can do that with your next paper." And I listen. Many times when I've worked with Hispanic students, I've realized that they really need to tell someone about the non-productive student-teacher interactions they have had. While it may seem easy for me to tell the student, "Go talk to your instructor; that's why he or she has office hours," it is not easy for a Hispanic student to move from a mindset where the instructor is always right to an attitude that permits questioning of authority, which is how most borderlands Hispanic students perceive an office visit with the instructor. For students like Rosa, approaching an instructor to ask for a justification of a grade requires the repudiation of everything her family has taught her.

I never cut off a student if he or she just wants to talk about school or about the problems he or she is having in a particular class. Such talk may seem tangential to the writing problems we need to work on, but, in fact—as I tried to demonstrate in my narratives of Rosa, Dahlia, and Leo—this talk is what helps students see the writing center as the center that can help them hold on to their academic goals. When our tutoring session is over, I always invite students to come back—or to email me—to tell me how they fared on the assignment. I hope such interest demonstrates that my investment in them is only partly associated with their writing: I am working with the student rather than with the writing.

Centering the Borderlands Student in the Institution

Despite the growing presence of Hispanics in the general population, they continue to be an underrepresented population in higher education: statistics from the U.S. Department

of Education show that only 9% of the total student enrollment in two and four-year institutions is Hispanic (NCES, Digest). Unfortunately, when Hispanic students arrive at institutions of higher learning, whether in the borderlands or elsewhere in the country, those institutions tend to be unable to respond to the impact that the students' ethnicity has on their success in the institution. Kells notes that she is "concerned by a gap in our literature [composition/rhetoric studies] that leaves unexamined the implications and consequences of the prescriptivist practices of English studies among sociolinguistically marginalized student populations" (7). Kells' study focuses on the experiences of South Texas Hispanic students in college classrooms, but her observations certainly extend to other arenas in the institutional setting, including the writing center where students' written texts come under even closer scrutiny than they do in the typical classroom.

It is time for writing centers to claim their place in the institutional environment as agents of access: because of our totally student-centered orientation, we are able to work with students in ways that seem to oppose the pedagogical authoritativeness of the classroom and that challenge the somewhat schizophrenic orientation of the institution ("we'll allow you in but succeeding is your business"). According to Kells, "the most obvious response by Mexican-origin students to the linguistic sanctions historically imposed by the United States' formal educational system is their eventual and total withdrawal" (12). While writing centers cannot right all of the problems endured by Hispanic college students, they can provide support that enables them to persist within institutions of higher learning.

Grimm's view of the writing center as an agent for institutional attitudes toward difference, Petit's view of the center as carnival, and most recently, Boquet's view that the center creates noise that disrupts institutional silence suggest that writing centers threaten the status quo on our campuses: writing centers enable non-mainstream students to position themselves in our institutions and eventually succeed despite obstacles inadvertently or indifferently created by institutional authority. Regardless of the circumstances responsible for their marginalization, non-mainstream students must find a center that holds as they journey through our institutions. Adapting Yeats' image, the writing center is both a locale and a mechanism that keeps "things" from falling apart—in other words, it helps non-mainstream students (in my discussion, Hispanic borderlands students) center themselves in the institution. The writing center centers students by helping them find a voice in the academy and by empowering them in ways that traditional institutional authority does not. The writing center can help Hispanic students: (1) understand that the classroom is only one of the settings in which teaching and learning occur in a university;

(2) realize that linguistic and ethnic difference should not be a liability, that such difference can work to change the institution's response to non-mainstream students; (3) appreciate linguistic and ethnic diversity as assets to the institution and to society in general; and (4) recognize that although success may seem unattainable because of obstacles created by the institution, it is in fact accessible.

The students whose stories I've told are changed students because of their contact with the writing center. They came from classrooms where their voices, their ideas, and their identities were mediated by teacher authority and modulated by cultural expectations. Because of their contact with the writing center, each has moved closer to meeting academic goals that could have been thwarted by institutional authority manifested in classrooms and in the overall institutional environment. The writing center, operating as facilitator of student learning and achievement, can enable Hispanic borderlands students to negotiate institutional barriers and to center themselves in the institution. Functioning as an agent for access, the writing center enables marginalized students of all types to maintain their dignity as student members of the academy by helping them find and grasp the center that holds.

NOTES

¹ I am using the designation "Hispanic" (instead of "Mexican-American," "Latino/a," or "Chicano/a") primarily for consistency since I am using Census Bureau and Department of Education documents that use the term to refer to the population at the center of my discussion.

² According to Susan Choy, writing in the U.S. Department of Education's Condition of Education 2002, a student is defined as "non-traditional" on a continuum based on the number of non-traditional characteristics met: delayed enrollment following high school graduation; part-time college attendance; full-time work; financial independence; dependents other than a spouse; single parenthood; no high school diploma.

³ Florida International University has a higher Hispanic enrollment (16,495 out of 31,293 students for a 57 % Hispanic enrollment) (National Center for Education Statistics, "Completions"). While its proximity to Cuba puts Florida International in a different type of "borderland," I am focusing on Hispanic students of Mexican heritage attending institutions on the U.S.-Mexico border.

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