

Leading with Awareness in the Work of Inclusivity: A Case Study

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Parker and Mease (2009) maintain that marginalization and privilege must be seen and properly engaged. They explain how organizations often claim to align with progressive expectations of equality yet treat the work as “special interest” rather than as an organic part of their strategy. This paper addresses this and recommends that communication center resource persons be aware of the invisibility of these structures. This dimension of service excellence through responsiveness and awareness is one which communication centers, as spaces fundamentally built on the ethos of support and growth, must pursue. The cyclical work of resource equality should be approached as an important component of communication center contract fulfillment for which everyone is responsible. But to truly apply oneself to this work, we need to consistently define, redefine and reassess where to start, what to do and possibly what not to do.

What Is (Not) Awareness?

In discussing diversity and inclusivity, specifically in relation to sexual orientation within universities in the UK, Ellis (2009) mentioned a type of awareness as a key tool in achieving progress and inclusivity for LGBT students. In what she describes as awareness raising, she suggests that it is an important strategy for addressing issues of prejudice and discrimination and also falls within the purview of education. Her suggestion on how to achieve this awareness raising is to embed LGBT issues (along with other diversity issues) within curriculum content. In discussing awareness within this context, the assumption is that raising this issue over and over again within contexts that students (the primary target of the study) are unable to avoid will “force” them to come face to face with the subject and engage with it. The persuasion behind this approach is part of the argument of this paper, but the definition of awareness moves somewhat beyond this point. This paper suggests that tutor-mentors need to consciously and intentionally acknowledge the reality of marginalization and then commit to consistent and ever-evolving proactive engagement with that knowledge.

Active awareness practice may sometimes uncover uncomfortable realities and intentionality dictates that we should be willing to engage with these realities. An example of such is our own implicit biases as well as possible microaggressions by other users/tutors within our spaces. Microaggressions are often innocuous and sometimes seemingly harmless to people who are not on the receiving end. Yep and Lescure (2019), addressed microaggressions as one specific manifestation of marginalization, especially within educational environments. They discussed its dynamics, namely invisibility, pervasiveness, normalization, and harm. They suggest among other things that opportunities must be co-created to highlight, address and

respond to these realities, particularly through pedagogical practices. A lot of the work in communication centers is pedagogical in nature which is why this recommendation is so important. This process of highlighting and addressing power dynamics is referred to as demystification (Yep & Lescure, 2019) and it speaks very strongly to the concept of awareness and awareness training. According to West (1990/1999), demystification allows individuals and groups to access and assess social reality more clearly. One way of achieving demystification is a multi-level process which Yep (2016) calls “transformative communication pedagogy” (p. 237). At the top of this multi-level process is awareness. According to Yep (2016), awareness refers to “the development of keen and nuanced observation of the social world to see and highlight sociocultural forces at work, such as relational dynamics, social processes, institutional spaces, and structural arrangements, ranging from covert to overt (e.g., how we talk about and treat people with disabilities; how physical buildings and social institutions are set up for or against people with disabilities)” (p. 237). What does this look like in communication center work? Awareness will entail the development of and sustained engagement with the keen and nuanced observation of the dynamics of operations at the centers in consultant-client relationships and beyond. The objective will be to **see** and **highlight**. This heightened responsiveness is central to proactively guarding against harm because like we do know, marginalization is often invisible.

In another study, while examining marginalization and several attendant issues through the very specific lens of Gifted Black Girls’ (GBG) lived experiences, Herbert and Anderson (2020) listed several tools which they recommended for breaking these barriers. The first of this and the most crucial component, according to them, is attitude. They called for educators to recognize marginalizing realities and intentionally combat assumptions/stereotypes among other manifestations of marginalization. This positioning that they describe as attitude is what this paper refers to as awareness. Preparing others to do this work is awareness training.

This case study is therefore preoccupied with examining the ways in which the university communication center under study pulled on awareness style and awareness training in its work at a predominantly white institution. Awareness, as already described, demands conscious and intentional acknowledgement of the reality of marginalization (Herbert & Anderson, 2020), practical commitment to consistent and ever-evolving proactive harm mitigation actions (Yep and Lescure, 2019), heightened responsiveness/keen and nuanced observation, and seeing and highlighting harmful practices (Yep, 2016).

Case Study at XY University Communication Center

The approach at XY University¹ Communication Center is multivariate but it revolves around a few core elements outlined further on in this paper. These core elements originate from data gathered and synthesized from XY University, the university communication center under consideration. While not necessarily generalizable, the syntheses point to the approach that this center adopts, how this approach speaks to awareness and awareness training and the effect of

¹ The name of the university was removed for the sake of confidentiality. The university is referred to throughout the paper as “XY University.”

the approach on the center's results.

The case study includes a detailed look at the performance statistics metrics in the communication center between 2019 and 2021. It also examines training and management practices over this same time period within the communication center. Beyond this, it includes case materials from researchers' informal discussion with staff as well as ethnographic observation of tutor-mentors work within the communication center.

The communication center practices discussed below include training, center climate check and center coordinator/center team role. For examining training practices, data was obtained through ethnographic observation of several training sessions between 2021 and 2022. Case material was also obtained from archived survey results of center operations in 2021. For center climate checks, case materials were obtained from informal interviews and conversations with tutor-mentors, coupled with ethnographic observation of tutor-mentors at the center in 2021 and parts of 2022. Case materials on the center coordinator's contribution were gathered from observation of the coordinator's training approach in 2021 and parts of 2022. The researcher also had a close working relationship with the center coordinator, allowing close-up access to training and working style, as well as training materials. The final part of the case materials for this section of the study was obtained from informal interviews with the coordinator on leadership style, training approach and training objectives.

Training

Yook and Kim (2013) examine how follow-up surveys can provide insights for tutor training. Their work also touches on the sparseness of research on staff training in communication centers, as the researchers explain, "therefore, investigations into the hiring and training of staff members in this important area of communication center research merit our attention" (p. 142). Providing insights into how centers train staff, as this case study seeks to do, is one way to encourage those conversations. Beyond contributing to communication center research on training, this case study also highlights how talking about training can be an important addition to the fight against racism in higher education. Villano (2020) mentioned this central place of training and resources while explaining the role of communication centers in the fight against racism in higher education:

Conversations cannot begin if we don't know where to start, therefore providing educational resources that emphasize the necessity and importance of antiracism in academic and professional atmospheres is a necessary and important step. Along with providing educational resources, centers should be providing specific training on how to discuss race effectively, reevaluating and being aware of our own biases, and actively confronting and challenging racism. (p. 120)

In keeping to this, diversity, inclusion, equity, and linguistic justice are prominent parts of job training at the center examined in this case study. Training takes two formats—inception

training and recurrent training. The inception training is used for new hires, and also at the beginning of every academic year. This is a comprehensive training that addresses everything included in center operation and center culture. In addition to training new and old hires on communication tutoring skills like presentation development, speech critique, slideshow creation and more, the training also integrates critical conversations about how to recognize harmful/non-inclusive practices and respond to them. This training allows critical engagement with the position of the center on antiracism and while these discussions are not always linear nor easy to have, the center continues to facilitate them, with an understanding that the discomfort is a part of the process. The antiracism commitment statement that the center utilizes recognizes the commitment to antiracism as an evolving work that is incomplete by nature.

This type of training then seeks to push tutor-mentors beyond knowing that racism is harmful, to proactively looking out for ways to make the center unsuitable for and intolerant of practices and belief systems that further harmful behavior. This is made possible because there is intentional training to identify and address. The work is proactive and ongoing, rather than superficial and performative. A specific applicative example is the training on linguistic justice that prepares tutor-mentors to resist approaching different communicative styles with a deficit mindset; to not overvalue the styles used by dominant groups while undervaluing styles used by minoritized populations. Tutor-mentors are taught to see and challenge the subconscious perception of certain dialects as erroneous. This means that the approach to awareness at the center is proactive positioning—conversations are being had and actions are being taken preemptively instead of only waiting around to react to overt racist actions. As Nguyen (2021) explains it “an antiracist center is one that embraces policy and practice that challenges generations of institutionalized racism and white supremacy. It is one that welcomes the challenges surrounding conversations about race and actively works to end disparities and microaggressions” (p. 127).

The recurrent training, on the other hand, is a weekly training/check-in that every tutor-mentor participates in, alongside the supervisor. Starting with themes and check-ins, tutor-mentors table issues they have come across in the course of the week. If there were issues that needed intervention, the tutor-mentors who handled the session would debrief their approach and the team would respond to the issues raised. In situations where these issues needed escalation, further action would have been handled by the center coordinator or relevant resource persons. When these issues are raised at the weekly meetings, the coordinator explains the actions taken (as appropriate). This approach allows the center to use these occurrences as case materials for training and to proactively prepare tutor-mentors for similar situations in the future. While themes raised during these weekly meetings are not always problematic, this model allows an open forum for discussion and learning. It allows discussions on how to apply some of the practices that tutor-mentors had learned in previous readings and trainings, as well as a forum to celebrate successes.

Another component of the weekly meetings/training is the discussion of feedback. Post-session surveys allow communication center clients to provide information on their

experience across the board, as well as their perception of the center's climate. This feedback is often largely positive or neutral but in cases where someone reports a less than stellar experience, center management reaches out to the client to follow up and then the situation is discussed at the training to offer insights and alternative approaches. This is in keeping with the model described in Benedict et al. (2020), a study focused on improving communication centers' effectiveness by examining impact and results based on students' feedback. The study measured consultant effectiveness by analyzing input from students who used the center. The result was then used in combination with professional insights to offer recommendations for improvement of students' experience and tutors' effectiveness in communication center work. Similar to this, feedback is used both to encourage the effort that tutor-mentors already exert and also to address and retrain on issues that come up if and when they do. This means that feedback, while useful in improving practice at the communication center, can also serve the dual function of helping tutor-mentors train to preempt reoccurrence of negative experiences at the center.

This approach to training in this communication center prioritized conscious and intentional acknowledgement of the reality of marginalization, and demonstrated a practical commitment to harm mitigation as seen in the way tutor-mentors were coached to interrupt marginalization. These are components of awareness and awareness training as already established in the earlier parts of this paper. While non-exhaustive, the styling of the training demonstrated and privileged proactiveness rather than reactionary measures and this tracks back to the definition of awareness as conscious and intentional acknowledgement of these negative realities that centers must work to mitigate.

Sustained and Evolving Climate Check

The weekly training meetings also provided a forum to discuss center climate. These sessions helped to sustain the conversation on how to do better. The center's e-resource database provides resources for tutor-mentors including an open discussion thread about combating racism. Holley and Steiner (2005) define a safe space as, "an environment in which students are willing to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues" (p. 49). While the center may not always hit the mark on this all the time, there is sustained commitment in pressing towards this ideal. Furthermore, Tonkins (2018) argues that communication centers should work towards authentic interactions with others in challenging dialogues with the hope of making centers both safe and brave spaces.

In defining the actions demanded by and exemplified in awareness, I highlighted the place of heightened responsiveness/keen and nuanced observation, and seeing and highlighting harmful practices. This component of awareness is what a conscious and sustained climate check achieves. By providing and supporting a forum for consistent climate monitoring at the center, the communication center in this study allowed for heightened responsiveness to harmful practices. In this way, tutor-mentors were encouraged to stay alert and attuned to all the nuances involved in successful creation of a healthy learning space for center clients across all identities. This level of proactiveness goes beyond performative declaration of a space as safe or brave. It

includes actionable training and discussion that tutor-mentors can reference when they are faced with these situations—this is awareness and awareness training.

Responsive Supervisor, Committed Team

A big part of the work rests on the management of communication centers in the sense that they direct the culture and have influence on important metrics, like hiring at the communication center. At XY University Community Center, new hires are carefully selected. Everyone is committed to doing better and the conversations never stop. At one of the team meetings, a team member brought up an issue about the undercurrent and tension they sensed in one of their sessions where a student was the only student of color on a group project. The consultant explained to the team the types of microaggressions they witnessed towards this student of color by the group members. They debriefed their handling of the situation during the weekly meeting and asked for input. The consultant's response was to redirect conversations, and help define a role for the student when it seemed they were being excluded. Debriefing this interaction with other peer tutors helped the supervisor outline ways tutors can and should both interrupt and address these types of occurrences. Similarly, surfacing the situation allowed the option of reaching out to the professor in charge of the class to check in with that student and the group and ensure that it was a safe situation for the student involved. This is an isolated example of the responsibility that the tutoring team as well as the center management have towards student experiences at the center and beyond.

Benedict et al. (2020) discovered that many students report on the impact of the positive atmosphere tutors create. The researchers explain that this feedback is congruent with conclusions of prior research that students recognize and appreciate kindness, politeness and responsiveness from tutors. This would suggest that the more committed and intentional the tutoring team is to the outcome of mitigation of harm, the better chances the center would have at hitting this objective.

A culture does not exist in a vacuum. It is enabled and sustained by people, among other things. A culture of proactivity and responsiveness is core to awareness as described in this paper and it was only possible because it was prioritized by the leadership and team at the communication center in this case study.

Recommended Improvement

As already mentioned, there is hardly any center that can make a claim to perfect execution of best practices. It is often an evolving labor, but a commitment to intentional awareness that will pull on some of the practices discussed above, alongside other effective practices already being used by many centers. One improvement that XY University may be looking to make is to optimize feedback instruments to capture certain demographic markers. This will make follow up all the more effective. When feedback indicates a negative experience at the center, it is important to have data highlighting if these experiences are happening to minoritized individuals more than to others. Similarly, this may provide pointed and objective

data that can be used for training and improvement of center practices. With XY University being a predominantly white institution, this information would be useful for obtaining clearer snapshots of who is using the center and the perception of safety for users whose safety may be more precarious than others in such spaces. This is an improvement that may prove useful for centers that aim to improve awareness and safety by instituting efficient feedback mechanisms.

Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this case study has been to highlight how intentional awareness differs from passive or performative involvement, and to demonstrate that tutor-mentors should be trained to be more aware. An “aware” center is a prepared and proactive center that takes measurable actions to drastically reduce if not eradicate manifestations of systemic inequities in center work. Centers can take this position and can train tutor-mentors to take this position, as this case study has attempted to demonstrate. While the approach and practices at XY University Communication Center are by no means the ultimate model, the strategies described are some that have resulted in positive outcomes and are therefore relevant as discussion points. Many communication centers in institutions of higher learning are bringing valuable impact to communication pedagogy and academic support for students. It is important to discuss these contributions in order to expand collaboration and extend the conversation. Highlighting the approach of different communication centers provides the opportunity to both improve the work in progressive iterations and invite collaborations.

In addition to training tutor-mentors on how to model presentational speaking and other skills, communication centers should train tutors on being aware of marginalizing practices and being prepared to interrupt it. This training cannot be a “one and done” event, nor should it be a boilerplate event that gets recycled at the beginning of the school year. Beyond simply claiming diversity in press releases or declaring intolerance of marginalization in performative commitment, communication centers must take active, measurable steps that organically balance out privilege within spaces. This work requires growth and evolution. It demands sustained check-ins, overhaul of ineffective systems as well as ongoing training for communication center consultants.

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