Chapter XI

Is This a Real Person?
A Tutor’s Response to Navigating Identity in the Spaces of a Synchronous Electronic Writing Center

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Abstract

This chapter explores some of the theoretical and pedagogical issues that emerged from a study of identity, collaboration, and discourse methods in synchronous online writing center tutoring. Based on a newly introduced online component of an established university writing center, the premise of this study was to advance tutor training in the context of transferring traditional face-to-face (F2F) methodology to a synchronous terminal-to-terminal environment in a way that effectively preserved the integrity of dialogic collaboration. What emerged became a study of the rhetoric of face and space, in which an understanding of the complexities of online identity perception and projection becomes key to adapting existing F2F tutoring methods to online space in a way that promotes pedagogically sound discourse and learning.
This conversation is from an actual chat transcript generated by the Auburn University English Center’s newest consulting tool—a synchronous online tutoring forum. This supplementary technology was designed to provide students with the same benefits offered by a face-to-face (F2F) tutoring session without the need to visit a physical office space. While the client’s question may at first seem humorous, it also encapsulates the legitimacy of many of the concerns and needs of students (as well as tutors) as they navigate the relatively new realm of online space as a location for writing and learning. The student’s quest to clarify the identity of this Electronic Consultant as “a real person” reflects both a need to establish a two-way conversation as well as a distrust of the medium. For the tutor, this transcript exchange foregrounds the need to establish and promote an online identity in order to effectively perform his or her collaborative duties and be accepted as a dialogic partner. It is also a revealing introduction into the question of how we communicate with others online and the ways in which this space can impact learning as well as teaching and tutoring. How does one consciously or unconsciously alter communication skills to traverse the “unreal” nature of this technological space, one which Reynolds (1998) has referred to as “transparent” (p. 14)? How does one collaborate online? What is sacrificed as untranslatable? How do we recognize that the faceless communication partner has misunderstood our last typed entry? If we accept Webster’s definition of the term “identity” as the “distinguishing character or personality of an individual,” how can that be reconciled to a medium in which many (if not all) distinguishing traits are stripped away, leaving only a text-presence? What seems to emerge from so much of the literature concerning online communication spaces and the authenticity of self is the idea of identity as self-definition/perception in terms not of real-unreal but of absence or presence, overt or disguised. This condition, which some have termed a “facelessness” (Jackson, 2000; Hyde & Mitra, 2000), brings to mind Foucault’s 1969 work entitled “What is an Author?” in which a name (an artificial sign-signifier with great associative power) becomes equated with character, persona, a face—in short, an
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