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Asserting the Right to Belong: Feminist Co-Mentoring among Graduate Student Women

BETH GODBEE AND JULIA C. NOVOTNY

Introduction

This empirical case study aims to identify how graduate student women mentor each other when tutoring writing and, through doing so, assert their right to belong in the academy. Much existing literature on feminist mentoring emphasizes the need for better mentoring for women, whether in work or school environments, in current or future faculty positions (see, e.g., Bona, Rinehart, and Volbrecht; Darwin; Eble and Gaillet; Enos; Fishman and Lunsford; Goeke et al.). Across the literature, there is also attention to the role that peer mentoring or co-mentoring plays in providing support for women in higher education. Jennifer Goeke et al., for instance, have shown the importance of peer mentoring among junior faculty for achieving both scholarly productivity and work/life balance. Lori D. Patton has documented that peer mentoring among African American women provides a range of benefits, including “sharing information with friends, writing and studying together, seeking advice, and simply enjoying conversations with a person they could trust” (529). And in

reflecting on their own relationship, Gail M. McGuire and Jo Reger have argued that reciprocal co-mentoring provides encouragement through shared success, allows individuals to pool knowledge and resources, and makes a space for sharing doubts about academia (62–63). While this literature suggests the value of mentoring, particularly feminist co-mentoring, it also indicates a need to understand better the nature of these collaborations. Specifically: what does feminist co-mentoring look like in practice? What interactional and relational work is involved when graduate student women mentor each other?

Toward answering these large but central questions, we use the method and theory of applied conversation analysis (CA), which allows us to present and closely analyze a case study based on videotaped interactions of two graduate student women of color who met weekly in a campus writing center over several months. This case was recorded as part of a larger study that involved videotaping writing conferences and interviewing writers and tutors about their ongoing relationships and work together. Though the case study participants never explicitly name

their collaboration “feminist co-mentoring” (likely because this vocabulary is unfamiliar), they both study feminisms (Chicana and Black feminism) and use the language of co-mentoring (i.e., support, solidarity, caring-for, and power) when describing their collaboration. When analyzing this data, we observed feminist co-mentoring, or two-way (reciprocal and mutual) teaching, learning, and laboring together among many participants of the larger study. These participants (writers and tutors, many of whom are graduate student women) mentor each other through complex writing tasks, including first publications, theses and dissertations, teaching philosophy statements, and job application materials. Through writing, the participants assert their right to belong within their chosen fields, as they also develop as future faculty members.

However implicit it may be, asserting the right to belong involves writing up to audiences with institutional power (with *power over* the writers) such as established faculty in their disciplines. What we see in the videos and hear reported in interviews is that assertions are made possible, at least in part, based on the mutual support of another person (the sharing of *power with*), which defines *feminist co-mentoring*. In what follows, we first argue for feminist co-mentoring as an alternative and much-needed approach to traditional/hierarchical mentoring. We then describe our methodological approach and selection of the case. As we turn to the case study, we introduce the participants and analyze a span of their talk that involves collaboratively moving from a hesitant stance to one of making strong claims. We conclude by offering implications both for individuals and institutions committed to mentoring.

IMAGINING MENTORING AS COLLABORATIVE AND FEMINIST

Our review of literature indicates that despite the many forms, methods, and contexts through which mentoring occurs, there is a need for re-envisioning mentoring as a collaborative and feminist practice. This framework of feminist co-mentoring, we contend, not only describes the mentoring among graduate student women in this study, but also provides the means for achieving more mutually fulfilling relationships, which, in turn, facilitate access to networks and resources still too often denied to women.

Traditional Mentoring. Traditional views of mentoring both originate from and advance the master-apprentice model. Traditionally, writes professor of business Anne Darwin, “mentoring has been used as a vehicle for handing down knowledge, maintaining culture, supporting talent, and securing future leadership” (197). Many researchers trace the origins of mentoring to Homer’s *Odyssey*. In this epic, the relationship between Mentor, Odysseus’s friend, and Telemachus, Odysseus’s son, marks the beginning of the hierarchical model of mentoring still in use today (see, e.g., Bona, Rinehart, and Volbrecht; Darwin; Fishman and Lunsford; Wiltshire). In this representation, *Mentor* signifies one who provides guidance, direction, and support; one who is an adviser, teacher, expert, leader, supporter, tutor, and master. *Protégé* signifies the exact opposite—a receiver of knowledge, skills, and guidance. The relationship is inherently unequal in terms of power, authority, and even opportunities for learning. And although there are benefits from traditional mentoring, such as the

opportunity to collaborate with high status individuals and to benefit from their social networks (McGuire and Reger), there are also many disadvantages that can lead graduate students to be wary of entering into this relationship and faculty members to worry about the time commitment.

A Critique of This Longstanding

Approach. The drawbacks of traditional mentoring are both widely documented and widely dispersed. As examples, students may be vulnerable to changes in status affecting faculty mentors; mentors may take advantage of students for their own research and advancement; mentors may dedicate limited time to mentoring, leaving students without mentorship or leading to slow progress; and mentors may provide guidance only in the professional realm, failing to advise on work-life balance (Bona, Rinehart, and Volbrecht; Darwin; Enos; Goeke et al.). Though many drawbacks may be perceived as individual, they are also systemic in nature. The traditional master-apprentice model can keep power concentrated among men, making it more difficult for women to have access to the knowledge, networks, and opportunities shared through this model. Rhetorician Theresa Enos has identified this model as partly accountable for the fact that men are still better networked, better paid, and better mentored than women (140). Working conditions exacerbate these problems, as many women faculty members are stretched too thin, taking on heavy teaching and service loads in addition to research. Certainly faculty members can and do mentor in meaningful ways, just as men can and do mentor in ways other than the traditional master-apprentice model (e.g., Healy and Welchert; McGuire and Reger; Meeks

and Hult). However, the need for another model is exactly what scholars of feminist mentoring continue to argue for, and this argument is informed by research on women's relationships and development.

Having been gendered male through its public display by men, traditional mentoring often fails to include women in the mentoring picture. As Bona, Rinehart, and Volbrecht put it: "there is an incompatibility between how the 'feminine role' has been understood and the kind of relationship that mentoring really is" (118). This incompatibility arises, in part, from research showing that women develop differently and are differently positioned from men and, therefore, have particular needs in mentoring (e.g., Darwin; Gilligan; Brown and Gilligan). In part, the incompatibility arises from women's mentoring being hidden or unacknowledged because "supportive relationships that facilitate a woman's development may be regarded as 'personal' (and thus undervalued) rather than as mentoring" (Bona, Rinehart, and Volbrecht 118). This incompatibility suggests the need for an approach that appreciates paradox: that recognizes women's mentoring, while also allowing for a range of interactional modes beyond the master-apprentice. Feminist co-mentoring appears to be such an approach.

A Different Mentoring Model: Feminist

Co-Mentoring. Feminist co-mentoring provides an alternative, as it values and prioritizes both collaboration and feminism(s). Advocated since at least 1995 by Bona et al. in *Feminist Teacher*, co-mentoring seeks to deconstruct the hierarchical aspects of traditional mentoring and instead privileges relational aspects, emphasizing mutuality. Working in partnership, co-mentors empower

one another, work as pro-active agents, and enter into a more holistic relationship rooted in a common goal. In this way, co-mentoring takes this concept of *power over* found in traditional mentorships and transforms it into *power with* (Meeks and Hult 15).

From the literature on co-mentoring, we see this transformation of *power over* into *power with* happens best when mentoring is reciprocal. The idea of *power with* means that the sharing of knowledge, access, resources, and insights is mutual, if not horizontal: *co-mentors* share ideas and have their voices heard; they feel supported and challenged simultaneously (Darwin 513). Through emphasizing the willingness to be in relationship and through welcoming partners to bring their whole selves into mentoring, this model transforms mentoring from a relationship out of necessity or coercion into one that is willed and mutual. At its best, co-mentoring allows individuals to build group solidarity, and solidarity gained from the stance of *power with* enables shared empowerment—making the whole stronger than its parts—so that both co-mentors gain from the relationship, even when those gains are different in degree or kind. Further, through shared support, partners engage in open discussion that can be severely restricted when one individual has status/power over another (e.g., Darwin; Kochan and Trimble; Meeks and Hult). Perhaps we see feminist co-mentoring especially among graduate student women because the stance of *power with* allows for collaboration (co-) in the sharing of knowledge, access, resources, and insights, even as elements of counseling, modeling, and teaching remain from the term *mentoring*.

Co-mentoring has been advocated for its many benefits, including the ability to increase confidence, to sharpen listening skills, to practice problem-solving, and to extend one's personal and professional networks. Because of its attention to power and relationships, it has also been (at least implicitly) linked with feminist mentoring and feminism. To be explicit, we see *co-mentoring as feminist* as it attends to the relationship and people involved in mentoring; carefully considers matters of status and power; and provides an alternative to, if not direct counter for, the traditional master-apprentice model that has contributed to inequities for women. As Bona et al. argue, co-mentoring is not a method but a relationship (119), and as a relationship, co-mentoring is associated with partnership, solidarity, empowerment, and agency—all important concepts for feminism and for anyone (men, women, transgender, cisgender) asserting the right to belong in higher education and other high-stakes settings. Further, as an approach and process, feminist co-mentoring redresses inequities associated with unequal access, resources, and insight into higher education: like radical feminism, this approach seeks to redress structural inequities and to restructure power relations. Rather than essentializing women or feminism, the descriptor “feminist” prioritizes goals, values, and history in a way that just putting “co-” in front of mentoring does not fully address. Believing that language carries consequence, we advocate “feminist co-mentoring” (the term) for centering feminism in the academy and “feminist co-mentoring” (the relational stance) for its ability to name the holistic mentoring relationship we observe among graduate student women, as we discuss further in the findings.

Methodology

In a summary of teaching resources on mentoring published in this journal in 2009, the author identifies, among other gaps in existing literature, a need to ask and to answer: “What interpersonal dynamics lead to effective mentoring?” (“Teaching Resources” 263). We take on a piece of this larger question, as we work to describe in rich detail the interactional and relational work involved in a case of feminist co-mentoring. Specifically, we ask:

How do graduate student women mentor each other around writing?

What conditions necessitate and make possible the emergence of feminist co-mentoring?

How do these conditions arise, and how might we foster them through both individual actions and institutional structures?

We answer these questions through the use of applied conversation analysis (CA), an approach to studying talk and social interaction that looks at both verbal and non-verbal communication. In what follows, we introduce our research design, describing (1) data collection, (2) selection of the case study, and (3) the analytical process focused on the theory and method of applied CA.

Data Collection. Data for the case study were collected as part of a larger study of one-with-one writing conferences that involved videotaping conferences as they naturally occur in campus and community writing centers and interviewing the writers and tutors involved in these conferences.¹ Though the study relied on a mixed-method approach, we treated the

two types of data differently: the videotaped interactions, as the primary focus, were augmented by interviews to provide insight into the participants’ motivations for meeting and evolution of relationships over time. Interviews were semi-structured and approximately an hour in length. For each tutor-writer pair, all writing conferences were recorded over several months of data collection, and review of these conferences led to the selection of our case study.

Selection of Case Study. From this larger data set, four tutor-writer pairs fit the criteria of graduate student women mentoring each other. To select our case, we viewed an hour-long writing conference from each pair and took narrative notes, identifying patterns across the pairs. We noted, for instance, talk about relationships with faculty advisers, validation for rest and self-care, and bi-directional teaching (i.e., both the tutor and writer giving advice and teaching the other). Once we noted patterns, we then selected moments to transcribe closely using CA—with the goal of highlighting an especially rich case of mentoring among graduate student women. We chose the conference between Charisse (tutor) and Andrea (writer) because they engaged in an extended brainstorming session that demonstrates not only the bi-directional teaching we see across pairs, but also the ways in which talk about writing—talk focused on one’s central academic work—can bring about what we identify and advocate as feminist co-mentoring. Through Charisse’s actions of asking provocative questions and writing while Andrea talked out ideas, the pair built a mutual relationship that contrasts with traditional mentoring.

Analytical Process. For this study, applied CA provides the analytic means to understand how participants “do” feminist co-mentoring. Initially developed in the early 1970s through intense collaboration by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, CA is both a theory of language and a method for studying interaction. We understand from years of CA research that talk is social, structural, and sequential: we respond to previous actors, propose roles that may follow, and enact our identities and relations with others *in the moment*. While initially developed to describe turn-by-turn action, in recent years, scholars trained in CA have “applied” this powerful methodology in a number of ways: for instance, intervening into practical problems by studying interaction and then suggesting change. Among applied uses, we see examples of feminist CA through the work of Cecilia Ford, Celia Kitzinger, and Hannah Frith, among others. Ford’s study of workplace meetings shows how women use a number of effective strategies in speaking up and voicing ideas in the workplace. Kitzinger and Frith have used CA to study the ways in which we indicate refusals, leading to a powerful critique of the prescription for women to “just say no” as part of date rape prevention programs. We follow the lead of these scholars by using the rigorous conversation analytic approach in combination with other methods and for practical, cross-disciplinary, feminist study.

Applied CA provides the means to study how participants—the writer and tutor in our case study—mentor each other in the moment and over time, as evidenced through the interactional and relational moves they make. This project, therefore, makes three interventions as it: (1) traces reciprocal, collaborative, and horizontal

mentoring rather than focusing on more traditional hierarchical and asymmetrical arrangements; (2) homes in on discrete moments to identify the interactional work involved in coaching, consoling, supporting, and asserting a right to belong; and (3) shows how mentoring emerges within the core intellectual work of writing and writing instruction in graduate education. Within this framework of applied CA, our data analysis involved repeated viewings of the videotaped interactions; transcription through an iterative process; and attention not only to verbal communication, but also to non-verbals, including gesture, gaze, and positioning. We looked, for example, at how social structuring is made visible—how the roles of writer and tutor are displayed, negotiated, and restructured in the moment. To capture as much detail as possible, we first created transcripts using CA notations traced back to Gail Jefferson and still in development today. To make the transcripts accessible to a wide audience, we then simplified excerpts, keeping the following basic notations:

Punctuation represents intonation.

Underlining and capitalization indicate emphasis and loudness.

Brackets mark overlapping speech or gesture, showing the onset of overlaps.

Pauses are timed in tenths of seconds with (.) indicating a short, untimed pause.

Laughter is represented by “heh” and “huh” (matching how the sound is produced).

In total, this analytical process led us to the case study and span of talk that follows. Andrea and Charisse’s interviews provide us with the larger context for their talk, and we begin our findings with

description of how they met, worked together over time, and developed a “friendship” (more than just working relationship) in the process of what we see as *feminist co-mentoring*.

Findings

Both graduate students at a large, predominantly white university, Andrea and Charisse meet weekly in the campus writing center, which aims to provide students with feedback at any stage in the writing process and provides the larger context for building solidarity through the stance of *power with*. The writing center enables feminist co-mentoring, as graduate student instructors are paid for their tutoring hours, and “writers” (visitors to the center, about a third of whom are graduate students) can meet for free one hour each week—an economic structure that ensures at least some degree of reciprocity among participants. This hour additionally provides participants with time for *talk-ing*—for lingering over issues of research and writing. At the time of this research, Charisse (tutor) is writing a dissertation in literary studies, and Andrea (writer) is preparing her dissertation proposal in education. Charisse is an African-American woman, and Andrea is a Latina/Chicana woman—both of whom are in their late 20s/30s. They have met weekly over the spring semester, and the span of talk we analyze here took place in April, several weeks into their relationship.

In the recorded session, we see Andrea and Charisse discuss the dilemma of finding time to work/write. Both Andrea and her son have been sick, and she is so tightly scheduled that if she loses her hours set aside for research, then she loses her writing time for that week.

Early on, Andrea reports to Charisse (and also reports this separately in her interview) that brainstorming during these conferences is especially helpful to keep research in the front of her mind (rather than allowing her work to fall away altogether). In parallel, Charisse similarly reports in her interview that working with Andrea motivates her continued dissertation research and helps her “re-appreciate theory,” which she had been distanced from through her own graduate education.

Throughout the hour-long session, Charisse takes notes as Andrea explains the theoretical framework for her study, her situatedness with other scholars, and her own stake in the research. In some ways, Charisse directs the conference as she asks Andrea a series of open-ended questions that lead Andrea to talk about her personal experience as a former ELL (English language learning) teacher in public schools and how this personal background informs her research on language policy and Chicana feminism. Throughout the talk and note-taking, Andrea and Charisse both do quite a bit of storytelling, which Patricia Hill Collins and Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, among others, have identified as a central meaning-making strategy for people of color, and which Marjorie Goodwin, Deborah Tannen, and others have identified as significant to women’s talk and relationships. The storytelling here is especially related to the problem of tracking in K-12 schools and to both keeping the project fresh in Andrea’s mind and helping her gain clarity and perhaps confidence in moving forward. Andrea does not write during the session, and neither does she look at a draft in progress. Rather, Charisse takes notes, as she is positioned as a recipient and perhaps a co-learner or even a student of Andrea’s research. In other words, this

note-taking is not only for Andrea, but also for Charisse to know her writer/student well: Charisse reports learning good listening and patience from Andrea, and we see her practice these habits here. Further, as someone outside Andrea's discipline, Charisse can learn from and support Andrea's work without the competitive edge that might arise among colleagues in the same department. And through supportive peer collaboration, in which Andrea's success serves as reinforcement, if not direct feedback, for Charisse as she develops as a writer and teacher herself, we find feminist co-mentoring.

Analysis: Entry into Talk. As we move into analysis of Charisse and Andrea's interactions, we find them fifteen minutes into the hour-long conference. They have already begun brainstorming when Charisse prompts Andrea to give an example, which leads to extended storytelling and gives Charisse insights into Andrea's perspectives and knowledge from life experience. Over a span of nine minutes, we see Andrea move from a place of hedging, slumping, and what appears to be uncertainty to a place of strongly asserting her argument based on her expertise not only as a researcher, but especially as a former classroom teacher. Charisse collaboratively supports the strong assertion in a number of ways: by writing, nodding, and clicking her tongue against her teeth—a physical manifestation that the idea has truly *clicked* and provides a powerful *critique*. These actions can be interpreted as collaborative construction of knowledge and as teaching reinforcement and, therefore, as both reciprocal in nature and evidence of co-mentoring.

We focus our analysis here on the tutoring/mentoring strategy Charisse describes

in her interview: that is, using questions to prompt conversation and elaboration. In this opening span of talk, consider how Charisse invites brainstorming and storytelling through her opening prompt, and consider the length of pauses, hedges, false starts, and non-verbals:

- 1 C: well, what did you can you say a
- 2 little bit more, in your
- 3 A: uhm hum
- 4 (1.4)
- 5 A: I guess- I guess part of what I'm
- 6 trying to say is that the larger the
- 7 geo- the larger uhm
- 8 (1.4)



Figure 1: Mental exhaustion.

- 9 A: geopolitical uhm structure that we
- 10 exist in
- 11 (0.5)
- 12 A: uhm also, in part shapes and you,
- 13 maybe, is- can be re-



Figure 2: Open palm.

- 14 A: mm- maybe can be seen (1.0) in
- 15 the micro interactions that we have
- 16 as well.

17 (1.0)
 18 C: okay
 19 (5.5)

As an entry into extended brainstorming, this span of talk begins with Charisse asking Andrea to talk more about her work: “can you say a little bit more” in lines 1–2. In response, we see extended pauses (lines 4, 8, 11, 14, 17, 19); false starts such as the repetition of “I guess” (line 5); hedging through the use of “what I’m trying to say” (lines 5–6) and “maybe” (lines 13–14); and corrections mid-utterance such as the revision of “the geo-” (line 7) to “the larger geopolitical” (lines 7–9) and “is-” to “can be” (line 13). Andrea lingers before answering, and her gestures suggest the difficulty of responding: by resting her fingers on her brow as though mentally exhausted or frustrated (figure 1) and then by opening her palm as though she’s pulling something, an idea or its expression, out of herself (figure 2). All of this—both verbal and non-verbal—suggests that Andrea is able to muddle through ideas without feeling humiliated or ashamed for not having a certain amount of work completed or a certain level of clarity before coming into the conference. This stands in direct contrast to what she reports in her interview, saying: “Most of my professors are just super busy, and the time they give you is very limited. They maybe schedule a month in advance for a fifteen-minute session. And you better have everything you want to say *clear* so you can get your feedback right away.” Instead, here we see not only extended time for collaborative brainstorming, but also evidence of an interactional pattern that makes the generation and explanation of ideas central.

To understand how this collaborative stance is achieved, we look at the

question Charisse asks in the opening line. Here Charisse begins with a question in the *past tense*: “what did you,” a construction that could be suggesting “what did you find?” or “what did you know?” This phrasing seems to invite some level of certainty. Yet, she revises mid-utterance to prompt: “can you say a little bit more” (lines 1–2). This rephrasing opens a range of response and is constructed in *present tense*, as though ideas can be generated in the moment. Toward identifying the interactional work involved when graduate student women mentor each other, we see evidence here of a relationship that allows for stumbling over ideas, for stuttering and false starts. Within the writing center context, extended time for brainstorming allows extended time for what we colloquially call “thinking aloud”—and, significantly, with another person involved.

Continuing with the span of talk, Charisse follows the long pause in line 19 with another open-ended and present-tense prompt: “can you give me an example?” (line 20). Again, we see long pauses, hedges, and false starts—building to lines 36–38 in which Andrea introduces the example of the ELL classroom:

20 C: can you give me an example?
 21 (1.5)
 22 A: sc-uhmm



Figure 3: Long pause.

23 (8.5)
 24 A: okay, well like, (.) just with terms of,
 25 (0.7)
 26 A: this isn't too micro, but like, in
 27 terms of,
 28 (0.6)
 29 A: language policy.
 30 (0.7)
 31 A: hum
 32 (0.6)
 33 A: you have bilingualing, (0.3) bilingual,
 34 (0.2) education.
 35 (0.7)
 36 A: and, (1.1) um, (0.2) you have these
 37 different types of classrooms. you
 38 have like the ELL classroom.

Again we see here a series of long pauses just after Charisse asks her question, as indicated in lines 21 and 23, with the 8.5-second pause being especially long. Decades of conversation analytic research have illustrated what we experientially know from everyday interactions: we have a strong preference for avoiding gaps in turn-taking. Therefore, these long pauses are significant as indicators that the participants value the time to think, as they allow time without talking. Rather than stepping in to fill the space, Charisse waits, tilts her head to look toward Andrea (figure 3), and then continues her practice of note-taking. In turn, rather than saying something along the lines of “I can’t think of an example off the top of my head,” Andrea takes almost a full ten seconds, resting her head on her left palm and gazing up toward the ceiling as though deep in thought (figure 3), before responding with what becomes an extended example. This span suggests that Andrea and Charisse have built a relationship in which both parties feel comfortable waiting for a response, which follows slowly over the next twelve

lines until the example of the ELL classroom is named. Their collaborative (or co-) relationship shows how solidarity is built through *power with*—that is, not only through the direct or immediate sharing of knowledge, access, resources, and insights, but also and significantly through the indirect and slower, sustained relational work that provides individuals with a sense of belonging—in this case, belonging within higher education.

We see, therefore, feminist co-mentoring happening here *not* as Charisse gives advice or suggests a direction for Andrea’s research, but instead as she allows the time/space for Andrea to work toward clarity in her thinking and her writing and, by extension, in her position as an academic. In turn, Charisse gains knowledge of “different types of classrooms,” especially the ELL classroom, which Andrea introduces in lines 36–38 and discusses over the next four minutes. Because Charisse is interested in educational issues, she learns from Andrea’s deep teaching experience, engaging in the type of pedagogical talk that can strengthen one’s graduate education and can merge the sometimes separate spheres of teaching, research, and service.

Picking up after these lines and through the framework of storytelling, in what follows, Charisse asks for clarification about how the ELL classroom works, and Andrea lends her personal experience to help Charisse better understand. Charisse appears genuinely interested—alternating between note-taking and attentive listening. At other points throughout the hour-long conference, Charisse shares memories of her own elementary school years, but here she just receives Andrea’s experience, maintaining eye contact and giving verbal continu-

ers (“yeah,” “okay,” “uhm hum”) to show agreement and understanding. As Andrea describes problems of racial segregation connected with bilingual education, she also names how the macro (e.g., educational institutions and policy-making) is reflected in the micro (e.g., who is removed from “normal” English classrooms and who is perceived to be normal). Andrea shares how she observed teachers making assumptions about students’ abilities and how those assumptions determined the kind and quality of education students received. Charisse and Andrea connect here, at least partially, through their shared interests in and commitments to equity in education. Interestingly, they enact a more equitable educational experience while describing inequity in detail.

Analysis: Firm Assertion. Concluding the span of storytelling, Andrea comes to a strong assertion that we see as emerging from and responding to Charisse’s first questions, to Andrea’s long pause, and to the storytelling itself. Specifically, Andrea draws on her years of teaching in the ELL classroom to make three claims: (1) that students who don’t fit the “norm” end up in classrooms that are not the norm, (2) that ELL classrooms are not the norm, and (3) that the norm is based off a white, middle-class, English, fluent child. To arrive at these claims, which are stated with emphasis and put down on paper, Andrea describes the problem of students being put into her ELL classroom based on perceived “problems of ability.” Beginning in line 523, we see Charisse’s response, which aligns with Andrea’s assertion (just before these lines) that something is wrong/weird with teachers removing students from their classrooms rather than working with them. Andrea, in turn,

further aligns with Charisse as she laughs, overlaps, and then further clarifies with a direct and strongly stated claim beginning in line 542. Here we see significance in the buildup to and the strength of this strong claim. The strength is indicative of solidarity achieved through feminist co-mentoring:

- 522 A: but (0.2) the idea is th [at
523 C: [yeah
524 that seems kind of
525 [weird. (.) to just kind of be like



Figure 4: Narrowed brow and smiles before laughing.

- 526 A: [yeah problems of ability
527 C: oh well [they don- they’re not doing
528 A: [heh heh YEAH
529 C: that well so we’re just going to put
530 them in a different classroom
531 as opposed to saying [oh well they’re
532 not doing
533 A: [YEAH. it’s like-
534 C: that well, I’m the teacher, I should,
535 (0.4)
536 C: then take them- uh you know like
537 that’s a [interesting,
538 A: [or the-
539 A: or the idea that- (.) I guess what I’m
540 trying to say is that.
541 (0.3)
542 A: the students who don’t (0.4)
543 progress in the curriculum the way
544 that maybe supposedly a normal
545 student- and that norm: is based
546 off a white
547 [middle-class English fluent child. (.)
548 C: [(smacks lips/clicks teeth)] ohhh.



Figure 5: Teeth click and quotation marks.

549 A: version of what is normal. so the
 550 students that don't fit that norm, (.)
 551 basically, (o.3) end up, (.) in
 552 classrooms that are not the norm.
 553 (.) and, (.) ELL classrooms at least
 554 in my situation, were not the
 555 normal class

We see in this span a drastic shift from the opening segment—a shift that we believe shows the possibilities that come from a relationship rooted in *power with*. Specifically, we find evidence of feminist co-mentoring in Charisse's supportive, affiliative moves that contribute to Andrea asserting her claims—and confidently. To see how this happens, we begin in lines 523–24 where Charisse stops writing, narrows her brow in a questioning, sarcastic expression (figure 4), and then responds affirmatively, showing that she also questions the schooling system. Charisse puts herself in the role of a teacher—perhaps mimicking the teacher—repeating first the problematic position of “they’re [the students are] not doing that well so we’re just going to put them in a different classroom” (lines 527–30) and then, in contrast, the position of a teacher acting responsibly: “I’m the teacher, I should, then take them” (line 534–36). Throughout Charisse’s teacherly enactment, Andrea laughs and affirms with “YEAH” (lines 528 and 533). In contrast to the ear-

lier pauses and slower pace, here Charisse and Andrea are speaking quickly, loudly, and at the same time. This collaborative completion of storytelling also offers Andrea the opportunity to further explain and clarify her position, which she does, taking the floor with “or the-” (line 538).

Andrea leads into her claim with “I guess what I’m trying to say” (lines 539–540), prefacing the firm assertion that follows—students who are not the norm end up in classrooms that are not the norm, and that norm is based off a white, middle-class, English, fluent child; therefore, ELL classrooms are not the norm (paraphrased from lines 542–55). After the initial, “I guess,” Andrea speaks directly, punctuating each word, each idea, especially as she builds up to naming the problem of the norm “based off a white middle-class English fluent child” (lines 545–547). Andrea emphasizes each word both verbally (here underlining represents emphasis) and non-verbally, as she uses her fingers as quotation marks and pulses her hands up and down on each syllable (the curled fingers can be seen in figure 5). In turn, Charisse not only records and reinforces the claim by writing it down, but she also adds emphasis when, in line 548, she makes a sound that appears to blend clicking teeth and smacking lips—a gestural vocalization (figure 5) that seems to indicate both that the idea has “clicked” and that the critique is very real, very needed. Charisse then opens her mouth wide and responds by drawing out: “ohhh” (line 548), further indicating that the idea has come home. Charisse’s response shows alignment and adds emphasis, if not direct support. It has the impact of encouraging Andrea to continue speaking. Finally, in lines 549–55, Andrea

grounds the assertions in her experience teaching, basing her claims off what she knows experientially. And perhaps by bridging her teaching experience with her research interests, she is and in the future will be able to speak about her dissertation from this same place of certainty.

Perhaps the opportunity to reflect on and share her classroom teaching with Charisse allows Andrea to see her past experience as valid and relevant and to connect it with her research going forward. Perhaps the opportunity validates storytelling as a form of meaning-making and epistemic knowledge. Perhaps it even brings about and solidifies the reciprocal relationship that allows for feminist co-mentoring. Any way around it, as Andrea speaks from her experience, she speaks with confidence, and Charisse not only validates Andrea's experience through immediate response, but she also creates a record of this powerful articulation by writing it down. Further, the storytelling allows Charisse and Andrea to learn about and connect based on their shared interests in teaching, education, and equity and, in doing so, to privilege the relational aspects of their ongoing work together.

Discussion and Implications

In considering the interactional and relational work of feminist co-mentoring, we see the importance of having another person involved in one's core intellectual work—in the work that defines a career in academia. As illustrated in Andrea and Charisse's interactions, graduate student women provide sustained support for each other, and so it helps to study *how* feminist co-mentoring happens in order to cultivate the conditions that allow for

this powerful approach. We see from the case study, for instance, the importance of listening, of allowing the time/space for storytelling, and of writing down ideas as they are expressed. We see the ways that time, writing, identities, and institutional context all matter. In this final section, we consider just three of the conditions that emerge as meaningful in the case study—(1) having enough time to linger over issues, (2) writing as a practice of recording and extending what is said as a means of empowerment, and (3) making connections based on shared and disparate identities. After drawing out these three conditions, we step away from the case and suggest the need for both individuals and institutions to foster feminist co-mentoring—with the emphasis on creating relationships rooted in reciprocity, mutuality, and *power with*. In calling for change, we ask that writing center practitioner-scholars more fully attend to the graduate students and faculty who make use of (and could more fully make use of) tutoring as *mentoring*. We also call for bringing attention beyond our site of inquiry (i.e., higher education), as the practice of feminist co-mentoring is both widely applicable and widely needed.

Time Matters. Part of what we uncovered through analysis of both the interactions and the interviews is that the perception of time as valuable, but already scheduled and paid for, plays a central role in allowing Charisse and Andrea to enact feminist co-mentoring. The writing center provides a context in which tutors spend time *on the clock* working closely with writers—in this case, for an hour each week. This context, in part, might explain why we see Charisse and Andrea slowing down

and taking time to talk things out. As Andrea says in her interview, the pressure of a fifteen-minute conference with her adviser means she needs everything to be *clear* before meeting and may, therefore, actually prevent her and other graduate student women from seeking mentoring from faculty advisers. The type of mentoring we see in the case study—in which brainstorming, storytelling, and generating ideas is central—may be left out of more typical faculty-student interactions for a variety of reasons. Due to time limitations and power differentials, advisers might jump in, interrupt, and insert their expertise in the field—packing advice into as short a time frame as possible. And yet more directive approaches may stunt not only the thought process, but also the writing process. Both Andrea and Charisse say they value time for storytelling, and we see evidence that Andrea builds confidence by talking about her teaching experience, while Charisse says she “learned to listen better” and “learned patience” from their time working together. It takes time to participate fully in this relational process, and so we need institutional structures—like writing centers—that provide this kind of professional support that too often remains hidden. At the same time, we need writing centers to acknowledge, communicate, and perhaps even advertise their work within the framework of *mentoring* in order to reach graduate students, junior faculty, and others who may not realize the professionalizing benefits of these campus centers.

Writing Matters. In the case of writing conferences, the writing itself may also extend the value of feminist co-mentoring. Andrea’s strong assertions are written down and so last beyond the moment of

interaction. These assertions—recorded through Charisse’s note-taking—become part of what she returns to when writing on her own and when speaking with her adviser and others in her doctoral program. The powerful moments we see, then, are not ephemeral, but lasting. When Charisse taps into Andrea’s classroom experience, they collaboratively create a record of the conversation and claims that arise, and the subsequent notes become the roadmap leading Andrea through her writing process. Further, the writing serves as a means of self-empowerment associated with the confidence built and agency asserted during the conference. We witness interactional work toward asserting a right to belong, which is different than earning a position over time. The case reminds us that instead of working to “earn” a place in academia, graduate student women can assert themselves through their own ideas, which take time to articulate and perhaps emerge more strongly when in relationship. In the case study, writing records, extends, even strengthens the excitement and self-assuredness experienced when arriving at an idea expressed strongly. By building strength in solidarity, feminist co-mentoring may enable strong assertions that actually work against what many of us are disciplined into: that is, slowly earning our positions—and the right to speak associated with those positions—over time.

Identities Matter. In addition to taking the time to build and sustain a strong relationship, which, in turn, contributes to Andrea arriving at a strong assertion and Charisse writing it down, Andrea and Charisse connect with each other based largely on who they are. Specifically, they share interests, racialized and gendered identities, and the larger institutional con-

text, even as they have different cultural backgrounds, disciplinary perspectives, and work histories. Charisse explains in her interview:

So there was a huge common interest there for me because I'm very passionate about education, as is she. She was coming from the Latina perspective, and I was coming from the Black perspective. But we still found common interest in the fact that we were both minorities who had moved through school systems as students, but also as instructors who have seen from both sides how messed up things can be sometimes . . . So, we bounced ideas off each other and talked about it in that way, you know, sharing anecdotes of my own and her sharing anecdotes of hers.

We see this as a testimonial to the value of feminist co-mentoring: Charisse reports relating based on common interests in education and shared identities as women of color at a large predominantly white university. Rather than a relationship of *power over*, we see here *power with*, or the deep solidarity that aids in navigating the university and the institutionalized racism that they address explicitly when Andrea shares stories from teaching and Charisse from her years of schooling.

Even though Charisse and Andrea aren't in the same discipline, they are able to provide a range of professional and personal support as graduate students who see each other as "peers" and "friends," as reported in their interviews. The two women draw on deep reservoirs of their own experiences only to learn that they share many of the same questions rooted in the shared desire to be good teachers and to counter educational inequities. And perhaps because they come from different disciplinary per-

spectives, Andrea is able to teach Charisse about her research, taking on the role of expert and gaining experience speaking from a position of *knowing well* her work. Having a mentor in a different discipline, then, could have a number of benefits: for keeping things interesting, for ensuring reciprocity as there is always teaching and learning, and even for building confidence as both participants retain expertise in their own areas of study. It seems to matter that the right combination of shared and contrasting identities is in place for feminist co-mentoring to emerge.

Individuals and Institutions Both Matter.

Finally, we conclude by asking how institutions can do more to support the work of individuals engaged in feminist co-mentoring and how individuals, in turn, can do more to change the institutional cultures through which mentoring occurs. Here we are imagining a multi-faceted or both/and approach to fostering feminist co-mentoring, an approach that asks of both individuals and institutions. Individuals might begin by recognizing where they are already involved in feminist co-mentoring, where it could be extended or tried anew, and how current mentoring approaches could be deepened. If we agree that feminist co-mentoring plays an important role in fostering one's sense of value (i.e., self-empowerment, agency, solidarity), then individuals can recognize it as important to their own and others' positions in academia and put time toward it (even folding it into other time-demanding tasks), rather than being pulled away by all the other demands on time.

In turn, institutions (i.e., those individuals who are/run different parts of institutions) can do more to provide the conditions and structures that support

this important work—from giving individuals “credit” for the time involved in relational work to rethinking systems of credit that get in the way of more meaningful mentoring. Institutional change here might involve both giving mentoring cultural currency in the university (see, e.g., Cochran and Godbee) and clearly depicting mentoring within the categories of teaching, research, and service. Since our value systems in higher education tend to connect with time, money, and status, institutions might think more about how to ensure time, money, and status for feminist co-mentoring. And to assure the widest access possible and to communicate that mentoring is for all of us, we need to foster conditions for horizontal feminist co-mentoring across the vertical structures of the university: in other words, among administrators, among senior faculty, among junior faculty, among graduate students, among undergraduates, and so on.

The writing center provides one example of an institutional space with the conditions to foster feminist co-mentoring: although relationships cannot be imposed or guaranteed, they can emerge when time and space is set aside for “just talking” about writing and other central intellectual activities. In this context, tutors are paid for their time and earn lines on their CVs, while writers who visit the center make tangible progress and receive significant feedback on their work—on a regular basis. Writing fellows programs, writing groups, dissertation camps, and teaching-and-learning workshops are other examples of institutional structures that seem likely to support feminist co-mentoring. Across these institutional structures, we see the need for spaces and times in which individuals can find one another, sustain relationships through ongoing meetings, and make real

headway in their core intellectual work associated with research and teaching, as we see in the case study.

Beyond the Case Study. A danger of any case study is that we can fail to see beyond it, and this danger surely arises through our focus on graduate student women mentoring each other. We spend time in this piece focused on the one case to see the intricacies of interaction—the relational and rhetorical moves that are made in feminist co-mentoring—and, in doing so, are able to describe *how* this relational stance is enacted. Moving beyond the case study, however, we can begin to imagine a range of feminist co-mentoring, because what we see between Andrea and Charisse doesn’t just happen among graduate students. It doesn’t just happen among women. It doesn’t just happen around writing. Anecdotally, we see it in numerous other contexts and in our own collaborative writing relationship as well. We hear it reported by colleagues and friends. And we are reminded of its wide-reaching importance in the literature—that feminist mentoring and co-mentoring (what we’re combining to be “feminist co-mentoring”) occurs in educational and workplace contexts, in community settings, and among familial groups.

Though Andrea and Charisse never name their work as feminist co-mentoring (and though we never asked the question), they do talk about the significance of their collaboration—and how it fills a void, providing precisely what Andrea cannot get from her adviser and what Charisse cannot get from her teaching preparation. After months of meeting together, they begin meeting outside the writing center as friends (in a coffee shop, at a garage sale, and over Facebook)—in settings

that tend to be more commonly associated with informal mentoring. So much literature indicates that the academy fails to provide women, especially women of color, with supportive relationships that help them stay in graduate programs and continue on to tenure-track positions. Yet, what we are documenting here is the type of social support that provides nourishment where it's too commonly lacking—and, interestingly, because it's taking place in the writing center, it's focused on writing-research work, typically the *core* of one's academic work.

We see, therefore, the potential for restructuring traditional asymmetrical power relations, as women involved in feminist co-mentoring assert the right to belong within academia. Asserting the right to belong is aligned with naming power relations explicitly; challenging them through providing alternative means of support; and practicing speaking up and making strong claims—communicative acts that may actually change how power is viewed, understood, performed. While the case study allows us to document change in terms of who has access to mentoring and who goes on to mentor others, the additional *potential* for redistributing asymmetrical power arises from an understanding that small acts over time cumulate into larger, systemic outcomes.² The trouble with documenting change in power relations, especially when attending to micro-level interactions, is that we can't say for sure that Andrea wouldn't have received mentoring (though she describes the lack she is facing), and we can't say for sure that the mentoring is keeping her in school (she was, after all, determined enough to seek out the writing center and would likely have found other sources of support). Yet,

we certainly can say that here we find two graduate student women treating each other *as mentors* (not ascribing this role solely to faculty members), and we see the writing center (as a larger structure) intervening into traditional avenues of access, networking, and mentorship in higher education—all of which is very much connected to power—and often the traditional forms of asymmetrical power, or *power over*. Because of these findings and the potential for larger impact, we advocate feminist co-mentoring—in name and practice—for centering feminism in the academy and for providing us with the relational means of challenging many exclusionary practices.

To foster this feminist co-mentoring more widely, we see the need to bring attention—in institutional change, in next directions for research, and even in the language we use—to the many relationship types in which it might occur. Rooted in reciprocity, relationship, mutuality, and *power with*, feminist co-mentoring has the potential to change our image of what it means to be in higher education. In other words, this mentoring can help to broaden our picture of the people in higher education and those who mentor—ensuring that women, people of color, and others are clearly represented. When feminist co-mentors become invested in each other's success, as both Andrea and Charisse say they are in one another, then *together* we may assert and maintain the right to belong in the academy and, in doing so, may also change the ways we take ownership for our individual working lives and larger institutional conditions.

NOTES

1. These data were collected with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and with

informed consent from participants to represent their talk and interaction in print.

2. A significant body of research shows that micro-inequities and microaggressions—seemingly small, everyday actions and inactions—cumulate to become significant and systemic over time (see, e.g., Nadal; Rowe; Sue; Sue et al.).

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