

Invitational Rhetoric as a Method for Supporting Multilingual Writers in the Writing Center

Lin Li
Virginia Tech

“You are invited!” When we hear these words, we anticipate acceptance, not rejection; we expect to be welcomed, not excluded; we enter a space where our presence is valued, not dismissed. This spirit of welcoming is crucial in writing centers, where tutors aim to support and empower all writers. For multilingual writers, who might be concerned about being perceived as less capable (Bruce), this sense of inclusion is especially significant. As a multilingual tutor, I find nurturing such an atmosphere particularly complex as I must navigate linguistic differences and complex cultural dynamics about authority, teaching, and learning.

While writing center scholarship has explored various tutoring approaches, much of the existing literature often assumes tutors are native English speakers from the US, overlooking the unique needs of multilingual tutors. For example, Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli emphasize “active listening” (65-68), while Ben Rafoth advocates for “negotiated interaction” (48) in their tutor training materials. These scholars offer valuable insights. However, their work primarily assumes native English-speaking tutors working with multilingual writers and leaves a gap in the scholarship in our field around the praxis of multilingual tutors.

I contend that invitational rhetoric offers a valuable framework for multilingual tutors to create more inclusive and empowering tutoring sessions, particularly with multilingual writers. Developed by Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, this theory envisions communication as “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (“Beyond Persuasion” 20). It values diverse experiences in communication by seeing individuals as “unrepeatable individuals” (Walker qtd. in Foss and Griffin 25) and acknowledging their “irreducible distinctness and difference” (Benhabib qtd. in Foss and Griffin 25), thus legitimizing our unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds as resources rather than barriers.

Drawing from my six semesters of exercising these principles as a multilingual tutor, this self-reflective study demonstrates how invitational rhetoric’s emphasis on principles including “offering perspective,” “safety,” and “value” has helped me move away from the teacher-centered authority engrained by my Chinese cultural background to create equal dialogues with writers. In what follows, I examine invitational rhetoric’s feminist origins and its key principles. I then explore how this theory can complement writing center practices by emphasizing deeper human connection. I conclude by analyzing my tutoring experiences with a writer from Iran, whose culture shares the Chinese value of holding teachers in high esteem. I hope my analysis demonstrates how invitational rhetoric has guided me in navigating cultural complexities and power dynamics and has the potential to do so for other multilingual tutors.

INVITATIONAL RHETORIC: EMBRACING INTERCONNECTION

Invitational Rhetoric emerged in the early 1990s in response to feminist critiques of traditional rhetorical theories. Scholars such as Carole Spitzack and Kathryn Carter contend traditional theories marginalize women's communication styles and serve "the interests and predispositions of privileged groups—namely men" (403). Further developing this critique, Foss and Griffin highlight a "patriarchal bias" ("A Feminist Perspective" 331) in rhetorical theories. They challenge Kenneth Burke's focus on a "rhetoric of domination," which they think promotes a hierarchical mode of communication, and find an alternative in Starhawk's feminist philosophy, which is rooted in the concept of "immanent value" and "interconnection." According to Starhawk, every being has inherent worth that "does not have to be earned, acquired, or proven" but is "inherent in our existence" (qtd. in Foss and Griffin 334). This intrinsic worth means our relationships are not hierarchical but naturally mutual and interconnected, as "all beings exist in the relationship" and "no power is entirely separate from our own power, no being is entirely separate from our own being" (qtd. in Foss and Griffin 333). Drawing from insights into Starhawk's work, Foss and Griffin propose invitational rhetoric, moving beyond traditional persuasive rhetoric and towards non-hierarchical communication.

Invitational rhetoric subverts the established modes of hierarchical communication through two key communicative forms: "offering perspectives and the creation of the external conditions of safety, value, and freedom" (Foss and Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion" 27). "Offering" prompts rhetors to share their ideas "without advocating for their support or seeking their acceptance" (21). This principle disrupts the traditional power structures in hierarchical communication by rejecting the idea that the rhetor's primary role is to persuade or dominate. Instead, rhetors show "how it looks and works for them" (21), positioning themselves as equal participants in dialogue rather than authorities who seek to control others.

Meanwhile, the three external conditions are designed to nurture the confidence of audience members, encouraging them to contribute their viewpoints. "Safety" functions to open dialogue by ensuring participants share their thoughts without having to "fear rebuttal of or retribution for their most fundamental beliefs" (25). "Value" dismantles hierarchy by recognizing all participants' inherent worth, ensuring "the right of all beings capable of speech and action to be participants" in the conversation (Benhabib, qtd. in Foss and Griffin 25). "Freedom" supports participants' right to make their own choices and decisions. Together, the principle of offering and these three external conditions are meant to foster an environment dedicated to mutual understanding instead of dominance.

Invitational rhetoric has been discussed in writing center scholarship. For example, Nouf Alshreif takes Foss and Griffin's work further by introducing invitational rhetoric as an inclusive tutoring framework. She contends that invitational rhetoric "can be adopted by tutors who coach multilingual writers" to "validate their unique voices" and individual experiences. Despite Alshreif's valuable insights, there remains a gap in exploring the impact of cultural dynamics on multilingual tutor-writer sessions.

INVITATIONAL RHETORIC IN WRITING CENTER WORK

Invitational rhetoric aligns with the established practices of writing centers in several ways. First, invitational rhetoric aims "to provide the basis for the creation and maintenance of relationships of equality" (Foss and Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion" 26). In writing centers, tutors already apply this principle by encouraging writers to take an active role in the learning process rather than positioning themselves as experts. Second, invitational rhetoric emphasizes fostering a non-

critical atmosphere based on “respect and care” (25). This emphasis on non-judgment means tutors create a space where writers feel safe sharing their work without worrying about being judged or criticized. Third, invitational rhetoric encourages rhetors to offer ideas without imposing their perspectives on others (20). In writing center practice, this sharing means tutors (as rhetors) offer suggestions while respecting writers’ autonomy in decision-making. Furthermore, invitational rhetoric emphasizes creating conditions that acknowledge participants’ inherent worth (25). In tutoring practice, this “value” concept encourages tutors to respect writers’ ideas and abilities. Instead of simply telling writers what to change or correct, tutors view writers as active contributors.

While writing center pedagogy focuses on the writer rather than just the text, invitational rhetoric takes this principle a step further by emphasizing the whole person behind the writing. This approach deepens the writing center’s mission by helping tutors see and support writers both as learners developing skills and as individuals bringing their unique experiences and perspectives to the consultation. Upholding the philosophy, invitational rhetoric can help tutors create a space where writers feel truly seen, heard, and valued as whole persons.

Despite invitational rhetoric’s potential, applying this theory in practice presents some complexities and requires multilingual tutors to examine their cultural assumptions when tutoring multilingual writers. To illustrate both the challenges and potential of using invitational rhetoric in the interactions between multilingual tutors and writers, I offer an anecdote from my tutoring experience.

FROM AUTHORITY TO ALLY: THE POWER OF SHARED VULNERABILITY

Resonating with invitational rhetoric, I intentionally applied it to my tutoring practice for around two months before meeting the writer described below. This practice taught me that deeply ingrained cultural values can get in the way of applying its principles. Deeply entrenched in Confucianism, I had never questioned the relationship between teacher and writer, where a teacher is seen as an authority, “a preacher transmitting infallible knowledge” (Dong 365), and writers as the disciples who humbly seek the “correct” knowledge. However, this cultural norm conflicts with the invitational rhetoric advocated by Alshreif to empower multilingual writers. This internal conflict became apparent during a session when I worked with an Iranian undergraduate. I found myself automatically taking an authoritative position when the writer sought my suggestions, which turned out to make the writer more reserved. As I navigated the conflict, I adjusted my approach by reducing the power imbalance and trying to see the writer as an equal learner. The outcomes were transformative. The writer became open and developed a more active mindset in addressing her challenges. This experience forms the foundation for my argument: Although invitational rhetoric theory originated in Western communication studies, its principles can be successfully applied in cross-cultural tutoring environments and to help multilingual tutors navigate cultural complexities.

This session is still vivid in my mind. I can easily recall the tension in her eyes when I first saw her. When I asked about her goals for our session, she expressed only a desire to practice oral English. To find a topic that both of us were interested in, I mentioned my past teaching experience and my journey from China to the US. Gradually, she opened up more. She confided that she felt lonely and disconnected from her classmates. She went on to say that she often remained silent in class and left the classroom right after lectures, never lingering to chat with her instructors and classmates. I could sense that beyond English practice, she was looking for advice on how to overcome a feeling of alienation. I guessed that my dual role as a fellow student and an educator

with prior working experience likely built my ethos as someone who understands writers and their emotional needs. This ethos led her to trust me and share her concerns.

Faced with this young international student's request for advice, I suddenly felt a mighty duty as a senior educator and experienced "expert" to guide this newcomer. I gave her suggestions such as joining social events to practice interpersonal skills. But as I presented this advice, I began to doubt its value, and I sensed her hesitation. I gently asked her thoughts. "Um...won't work," she finally admitted.

As we continued talking, I remembered to check my approach against the principles of invitational rhetoric. I quickly recognized that my approach up to that point had been superficial and contrary to the theory's central tenets. In contrast to Foss and Griffin's advocacy that invitational rhetors do not "claim that their experiences or perspectives are superior to those of their audience members" ("Beyond Persuasion" 20), my initial positioning as an "education expert" placed me above the writer, creating a hierarchical dynamic and distancing her. This power dynamic was reinforced by the writer's cultural background, which as mentioned, reveres educators. According to Mansour Javidan and Ali Dastmalchian, in Iranian teacher-student interactions, teachers' opinions carry more weight. Openly disagreeing with teachers is often seen as disrespectful (132). The combined effect likely hindered her from freely expressing her thoughts.

Foss and Griffin call for rhetors to foster "a feeling of security and freedom from danger for the audience" ("Beyond Persuasion" 25). This feeling of safety can be obtained when a rhetor "conveys to audience members that the ideas and feelings they share with the rhetor will be received with respect and care" (25). To foster this trust, I needed to reduce the gap between us and adjust my approach. Here, I drew more helpfully from my experience in Chinese culture, where sharing personal stories and vulnerabilities often helps show emotional honesty and promotes mutual trust. This sharing is an example of Foss and Griffin's "offering," where "rhetors tell what they currently know or understand by presenting their vision of the world and showing how it works for them" (22). I began to share the difficulties I faced as a non-native English speaker in joining fast-paced classroom discussions. I confessed, "You know, I often found myself sitting there, thinking hard about what to say. When I finally gathered my thoughts, I became so excited and anxious that when I finally worked up the nerve to open my mouth, I realized my classmates had already moved to something else." The writer's laughter at this conveyed a clear message: she understood me. An emotional bond rooted in our shared experience of navigating an unfamiliar environment had begun to form. My experience demonstrates the effectiveness of Alshrif's advocacy for "express(ing) feelings that convey empathy through trying to perceive things from the tutees' perspectives." Knowing that I was sincere and willing to respond to her views with care and respect, she no longer hesitated and became comfortable asking more questions. This transformation suggests that invitational rhetoric, combined with my cultural knowledge, provided me with a useful framework for creating an empathetic tutoring environment.

I told her that many multilingual writers may find themselves in difficult situations and shared some ways I had adapted to the US classroom culture. After lectures, I often asked my classmates to clarify points that I found challenging. These discussions sometimes went beyond academics to life, culture, and history, and I naturally connected more with my peers. By discussing my strategies, I once again practiced "offering," sharing what the rhetor knows without imposition (Foss and Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion" 22). My collaborative approach respected the writer's agency to make choices and determine what worked best for her. As she left, it was clear to me that she was encouraged by our conversations.

Based on my experience with this writer and others, I argue that invitational rhetoric can effectively guide multilingual tutors, provided they critically self-reflect on their cultural assumptions. Initially, I assumed I grasped the concept of invitational rhetoric and could apply it easily. However, in practice, my cultural background and past work experience interfered. As a result, my impulse to offer advice as an “educational expert” unintentionally created distance between the writer and me and silenced her voice. Recognizing this, I stepped back from the role of an “authority” and managed to reduce the power imbalance. By sharing my moments of awkwardness as a multilingual student, I created conditions of equality and safety that effectively encouraged the writer to share her concerns. When she sensed that I genuinely cared about her joys and anxieties rather than merely fulfilling my duty, our communication flourished.

I believe that invitational rhetoric offers a framework and language that can empower multilingual tutors as we engage in the cross-cultural tutoring to which we are so well suited due to our own cross-cultural experience. Multilingual tutors who have studied in both our home countries and abroad have gained firsthand insights into the challenges of navigating unfamiliar academic environments. These dual perspectives lead to what Suresh Canagarajah terms “cosmopolitan dispositions,” an ability to move between different cultural and linguistic spaces (43). These “cosmopolitan dispositions” also enable us to integrate invitational rhetoric principles into our tutoring practice. Because we know firsthand how tough adjusting can be, we understand writers’ feelings better and see ourselves and writers as equal learners exploring ideas together.

CONCLUSION

Invitational rhetoric can be particularly effective for multilingual tutors and First-language (L1) English tutors. For me, as a multilingual tutor, it challenged my traditional values and helped me switch my role from an “authority” to a co-learner. My experience points to the possibility of writing center scholars developing tutor preparation materials tailored for multilingual tutors and incorporating invitational rhetoric to address the challenges these tutors bring to their work. For L1 tutors, invitational rhetoric’s emphasis on non-judgmental listening and valuing different perspectives enables them to engage in egalitarian exchange, helping them reflect their implicit cultural assumptions and better understand concepts from other cultures. By integrating invitational rhetoric with cultural awareness and tailored strategies, multilingual tutors can empower multilingual writers.

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