IWCA 2015 Proposal
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“From Safe to Brave Worlds: Developing a Heuristic for Discussing Social Justice in Writing Centers”

In recent years, many writing centers have worked to be safe spaces for all. For example, the idea of a safe space is one of the most prevalent discourses that surrounds LGBTQ issues. Campuses across the nation offer the Safe Zone program as a component of diversity training in relation to this community (Herb & Perdue, 2011). However, situations exist in the writing center where safety can become dangerous as a ‘safe’ discourse can disservice consultants by not preparing them for the possible discomfort they may feel when faced with oppressive people, language, or situations.

In order to better support consultants as they engage with colleagues and writers from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, writing centers need to shift mindsets from safety to bravery (Arao & Clemens, 2013). As Suhr-Sytsma & Brown (2011) explain, one way to make this shift is for consultants and administrators to collaboratively develop a social justice heuristic. Further, staff will engage in social justice inquiry that offers an alternate approach to diversity training while embracing possible risk, difficulty, and controversy. Critical concepts like “controversy with civility” and dynamic questions like “How can/do we challenge but not attack?” provide opportunities to rethink common assumptions of safe spaces and collaboratively determine what it means to create a brave space.

In this interactive presentation, we will examine common assumptions of safe spaces, consider key components of brave spaces, and explore possible strategies and activities to engage social justice issues in consultant professional development. Participants will leave with practical tools and a theoretical frame to empower consultants to address local social justice issues in their own brave writing centers.