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Interchapter 4B

Welcome to Your Place: The Inclusive Power of Greetings

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About the Author

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I've been wandering campus for twenty minutes carrying a lukewarm lunch looking for a seat. My stomach growls loudly as I walk into yet another building and up the circular stairs. I think I might be in the library, but I'm not sure and don't care. I just want to eat at this point. Near the top of the stairs, I find a cushy green chair to sit in, set my food down, and sink in gratefully. As I open my box, I'm startled by someone standing in front of me! Uh oh, I think, maybe I'm in the wrong place. My mind races. Are they going to tell me I can't have food? That I need an appointment? That I'm misusing state property? They are going to yell at me, I just know it. How can I make myself invisible right now? I've experienced this doom scenario before on this campus, but this time, a friendly person plunks down next to me. "Oooh, that smells good. By the way, have you been to the Studio before?" They flip through a table tent with different options, reject Hard at Work, and pause at Taking a Break. It's a promising start but I'm still nervous. Can I eat here? Should I leave? The person sees my apprehension and grins broadly, "Please feel free to hang out and eat! Oh, can I tell you about the Studio real quick?"

—Composite reflection from a typical Accidental Tourist

When I greet anyone in the Studio space, I always try to put myself in their shoes. As an important first impression, greetings nurture connection and rapport while inviting relationship and collaboration. They are my chance to establish my interest in visitors as humans, in their identities, needs, and desires. If greetings¹ lead to consultations, great, but that is not my goal. Instead, I use all aspects of greeting to exemplify invitation, community, and ownership, as if to say, "Welcome to Your Place."

¹ Verbal greetings aren't the only way to communicate welcome. For insights on visual ways to foster inclusive welcome, see Nordstrom et al., 2019.

We welcome a *lot* of visitors, to the tune of 70,000 a year. To tailor my invitations, I have found it helpful to categorize visitor types.

- *New neighbors* intentionally seek Studio consulting, possibly because a professor suggested they do so.
- *Frequent fliers* use the Studio regularly, often without consulting.
- *Accidental tourists* happen into the space, attracted by couches, comfy chairs, and movable tables. The student represented in the above reflection is an example.
- *Hidden gems* don't plan to work with us, but after an enlightening greeting, they change their minds; many go on to become frequent fliers.

Since we welcome sometimes more than 35 visitors each hour and often introduce the same information, it is all too easy to become robotic. Good greetings, however, demand more than the “May-I-help-you?” tagline that reminds me of a drive through. I want my greetings to be an intentional and authentic invitation to inquiry, collaboration, and agency for visitors across identities. In other words, greetings are not just politeness or marketing; they are pedagogy.

First Time Becomes a Habit

The first time I visit any place, I decide whether I will come back. When I get the urge to go on autopilot, I keep in mind that if I am uninviting, even unintentionally, a first-timer may decide not to return. On the other hand, if I make a good first impression, I may convert an accidental tourist into a frequent flier. At my best, I find personal connections that make visitors feel like part of our learning community from the start. New neighbors, for instance, may have erroneous preconceptions based on faculty misconceptions or previous writing center experience. In greetings that embody the Studio's collaborative atmosphere, I clarify our identity while giving visitors a clear

pathway for using our services. For accidental tourists, I don't wait for them to approach me. Instead, I greet each person in the space, so everyone feels comfortable visiting regardless of what they're doing. I am conscious of an inevitable, employee-visitor power dynamic, so my approach works to break those down.

Humans, Meet Humans: No Strings Attached

Front desks create a familiar barrier in built spaces, so the Studio strives to be barrier-free. We still need a contact point for intentional drop-ins, so our small kiosk, just large enough for a laptop, provides a clear target in an unfamiliar space. The shift manager stationed there sees all and establishes the open and inviting atmosphere by encouraging visitors to choose their own spot and settle in before a Studio Assistant comes by. This attention provides the first invitation to agency and community. Unlike appointment-based centers, visitors simply drop in². When there is a scheduled appointment, there are expectations and preparations involved. In fact, some centers ask hard-to-answer prerequisites about goals, drafts, ideas, etc. We aim to connect with visitors even (and especially) when they don't know they have questions or aren't sure how to express them. Reducing our expectations helps us communicate that we have no strings attached even during unavoidably scripted greetings describing our services. In other words, we lower barriers both to space and to services.

Permission to Eat Lunch

During greetings, we pass out table tents³ so that staff can tell at a glance which visitors have not yet been welcomed. In our first-time greetings, we demonstrate how

² In the Studio Partners Program and the Practicum, visitors who want regular coaching on long-term goals can sign up for a consistent partner, either for credit or no credit.

³ We use restaurant-style table tents with flip pages to indicate visitor status.

visitors can visually signal how much or little interaction they want with staff. For instance, they can choose *Hard at Work*, *Taking a Break*, or *I Have a Question*. For any student's first entry as an accidental tourist, I try to convey that the Studio is a perfect place to work on nothing by turning their sign to *Taking a Break*. Even when visitors are simply eating lunch, I always ask if I can explain the Studio's resources for reading, research, and writing. Usually, their response is joy and excitement because they did not realize we existed. I do not want to pester anyone, though, so I prefer to make my impression in a snap before leaving them to eat lunch in peace.

The Student Expert

When I greet and hand out table tents, I assess what level of introduction is necessary. For instance, some who are ready to work may not be in the mood to talk. Part of a greeting is leaving⁴ when visitors would be best served by learning on their own. We want to solidify an expectation that we will always say hello, but we also want to give visitors whatever they need, even when that is not consulting. While making ourselves known, we try to anticipate future needs by asking what they are working on, what class it is for, and their progress. If nothing else, these quick questions prompt visitors to articulate goals for their time in the space. Other times, I sit and ask visitors to teach me about their areas of expertise. I love how their teaching me convinces students that they are the expert in their own experience. As an absurdly cool bonus: I have learned literature, history, human services, and more from fellow students.

⁴ See [Interchapter 2A, "The Art of Leaving,"](#) by Eric Bachmeier.

The Power of a Name

Ideally, we start deeper conversations with our frequent fliers, starting with learning their names. One of my colleagues uses a name notebook to record each visitor's name and a few tidbits about their conversation to solidify their new connection. Just like business networking, little details give us the ability to start a more personal conversation with those we recognize, and that serves to enhance belonging and encourage visitors to engage with our services when they are ready.

The Curiosity Approach

The first thing I want to know about visitors is how I can contribute to their priorities. An inquiry approach hopefully helps both of us clarify those priorities. For new arrivals, I find myself asking, "What are you working on?" or when I approach someone that has been working for a while, I often ask, "How is it going?" There are lots of curiosity questions. For instance, if someone has been writing on a whiteboard for a long time, I often ask about notes I find interesting. If a frequent flier looks distracted or distressed, I might offer care by asking, "How are *you* doing?" Even when visitors are working outside our expertise (STEM, for example), I still ask questions about their major, their affective state, whether exams are approaching. If a chemistry visitor is working on reading scientific articles, they might say, "I'm just reading, so I probably don't need help." But my curiosity cannot be stopped. Once when I asked how their reading process was going, a chem student replied, "You know, it's taking a really long time." When I told them I had oodles of reading strategies, they eagerly asked, "Wait, really? Could you talk with me about them?" My attitude could be described as eternal

curiosity, but it is based on genuine interest, too. Every visitor presents a new opportunity for engagement.

Developing Greetings Pedagogy

Since the goal of greeting is partly human (making connections) and partly pedagogy (furthering learning), how do we equip new staff to greet authentically? Invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 2015) undergirds our greetings, but in practice, new staff learn by observing and by doing. During new interns' first three weeks, they observe senior staff using a variety of approaches. Before they begin consulting, new staff practice our pedagogies in greetings. Newbies may feel apprehensive about proactively making the first move, especially those of us who have worked in retail where we are used to customers approaching us only when they need something. Through practice, we shift to a more community-building approach. Even for introverts, greetings become fun. Refining our approaches allows us to tailor them across identities and to grow in cultural competence. Our individual personalities and our own identity groups lead to a variety of ways to make a connection⁵.

Leaving the Studio: Don't Forget Souvenirs!

Eventually, visitors leave. In my early days, they nearly always left their table tent for staff to retrieve. Nowadays, most visitors return their table tents to us while they say goodbye. This act signals both ownership and connection. As we prepare to leave this essay, I encourage these reflections on greetings as invitation and as pedagogy.

⁵ I think white bias is really important to bring in here. Visitors of color look excited when staff of color greet them because they relate more closely to employees with shared identities (anonymous BIPOC Studio Assistants, personal communication, October 26, 2018). Although addressing white bias lies outside my scope, I want to recognize its relevance to invitation.

- How do I represent our space to visitors? How can I be more invitational?
- Who do I think feels the most welcome? Who else do I want to feel welcome?
- Why do I think some visitors don't return? Why don't some ever visit?
- How can I extend invitation to those who feel the space is not-your-place?

With so many ways to engage visitors, there is no one right way. The freedom from scripts allows us to switch gears based on our own and visitors' preferences, and this furthers personalized interactions that ultimately communicate to visitors of all identities that this is both Our Place and Your Place.

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