The Stories We Tell: Narratives, Institutional Discourse, and the Public Documents of Writing Centers Part III

Tammy Conard-Salvo
Purdue University, tcsalvo@purdue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/writinglabpres
Part of the Rhetoric and Composition Commons

Recommended Citation
http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/writinglabpres/4

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
We spend lots of time telling our stories to students, faculty, and sometimes, administrators in the form of publicity or annual reports. Are we missing some prime opportunities to tell our stories? Do the stories we tell give a complete picture of writing center work, especially when we communicate with administrators—in other words, what do we include and exclude in our stories? Are we missing some stakeholders?

My presentation focuses on how research can and should be part of writing center storytelling, and I’d like to describe a project we’ve started at Purdue to more broadly disseminate traditional research and presentations, archival documents that represent the institutional research and history of our Writing Lab and OWL, and documents that have not been or cannot be disseminated through traditional means.
Grand Narratives

- Include community values, best practices, and lore.
- Dominate discussions and perceptions about the work we do.
- Can be limited in scope as it often describes a narrow context.
- Leaves little room for deviations.
- Restricts ability to adapt and be flexible.

I draw extensively upon Jackie Grutsch McKinney’s recent book *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, where she discusses the idea of writing center grand narratives and analyzes several common stories within the grand narrative, and why the grand narrative is problematic.

McKinney defines a grand narrative as a familiar pattern that describes and generalizes, in this case, writing center work—writing centers are comfortable, student-centered spaces or writing centers are places where students get one-to-one tutoring. These stories, which incorporate our values, pedagogy, and ideology, are not necessarily untrue (as McKinney points out) but they are limiting in scope because they don’t account for differences in context and circumstances—or all the possible variables and variations within writing center work. Thus, any deviation (such as using square tables instead of round tables, for example) aren’t or can’t be included, which restricts our ability—that of a single writing center and that of the field in general—from being flexible and able to adapt to changes and pressures that will inevitably affect us.
McKinney’s Peripheral Visions

“...I think the writing center grand narrative has narrowed our gaze to such a degree that others do not understand the complexity of our work and we continue to face untenable positions because of it.” (85)

McKinney’s makes a very important point here about the dangers of relying on the writing center grand narrative. If we don’t understand the complexity of our own work, or if we can’t communicate the complexities of our work, how can our stakeholders, including our administrators, understand what we do?

McKinney is not arguing against a common language but in only relying on those stories where we see commonalities and overlap. This leaves us in a vulnerable position because it creates resistance to flexibility and change, untenable because organizations and institutions must constantly adapt to survive, even if the changes are subtle and slow.
Here McKinney identifies a clear problem—that research is not always included as a necessary part of writing center administration. Research is required to defend, challenge, expand, or change what is considered necessary in running a writing center, and any research that is done often focuses on only one aspect of writing center work.

Through conversations, I often hear about the interesting, sometimes atypical work that writing center colleagues engage in, and yet that work, that research, is not always formally disseminated. One reason may be that we haven't found ways to share our work beyond conferences, traditional monographs and peer reviewed journals or perhaps because we have a limited view of what research is and what information should be disseminated. Of course, there are obstacles such as limitations with time and resources, which I won't address here.
Our stories describe who we are, what we value, and what we do. Although we have some overlap in these values, identities, and work among writing centers, each center is unique and has a particular context in which it operates. Engaging in research and disseminating research can provide a fuller picture of writing center work, expanding the narratives of our own writing centers and adding new voices and representations to the larger narratives that already exist.

Drawing upon the work of James Porter, Jerome Bruner, Brenton Faber and others, Jackie McKinney asserts that telling individual, unique writing center stories can offer “counterstories to the grand narrative.” More voices and stories demonstrate different representations of writing center work. When that research is shared, we can create a dialogue that can lead to positive change.
What do we do when we don’t have the time or resources to engage in the kind of scholarship and research that is necessary for avoiding the untenable positions that McKinney warns us about? Having a broadened view of research can help.

In other words, traditional peer-reviewed and published scholarship is still important and necessary, but research can also include other kinds of documents and information, many of which are already part of the day-to-day work of writing centers.

For example, administrative and institutional histories and documents such as strategic plans, annual reports, publicity, forms, news releases, mission statements, and anything else that can describe how a writing center was started and how it has developed over time. Many of these documents are created but not shared in any systematic fashion.

Research can also include conference presentations and materials not published in journals or books, documents that may not always develop into formal publications.

Data sets and technical reports are also fair game. This kind of information may be tied to an empirical study of some kind, but it can just as easily be intake data and demographics, information about how your writing center supports retention initiatives or benchmarking documents that describe the work of a writing center in relation, perhaps, to other departments or other institutions. Think about the surveys a WC administrator distributes during the course of everyday work. What happens to that information if it’s not part of a book chapter or journal article?
One way in which we at Purdue are trying to disseminate our research is through the creation of an open-access repository. When we first began thinking about this project, we did so with a singular focus in mind: to publically communicate to our institution that we actively engaged in research even though we also provide a service to writers.

We listed traditionally published scholarship and conference presentations in our annual report, but we didn’t house the research itself anywhere, and we didn’t make our reports available online. We began brainstorming what we could do to change this problem. We didn’t want to simply reproduce bibliographies on our website, so we considered developing something like a whitepaper series to capture what I call “lost scholarship”—presentations, documents, and other work that hadn’t been published or taken any further.

While we were thinking about this whitepaper series and what it would entail, we began a collaboration with the Institutional Rhetorics graduate seminar in our Rhetoric and Composition program, a course often taken by students who choose a secondary area in Writing Program Administration.

The students in Institutional Rhetorics researched possibilities and offered a proposal for the Writing Lab to work with the Purdue Libraries, which had been maintaining a highly-regarded and well-developed interdisciplinary collection of materials known as e-Pubs.

Now I’d like to give you a glimpse of what e-Pubs looks like.
We’re still in the process of creating our space and getting our materials online, and the examples I have to show you are from other departments on campus. Not surprisingly, the Libraries themselves have an extensive and well-developed collection that includes scholarship, creative materials (which, for this group, includes workshops and other materials not easily classified elsewhere), reports, and grants. Within these sections, users can find a variety of documents encompassing a vast array of work by the staff within the Libraries.

This particular collection provided a good model for us when envisioning what we might include and how we might organize our collection.
From the Libraries’ main collection page, users can find a series containing scholarship and research written by faculty and staff in the Libraries. This particular series is organized by year. The Writing Lab’s scholarship series might be organized by year, by scholarship type, or a combination of both. This particular section would include research disseminated through journals and books, and we would present a different series for conference presentations, administrative documents, and work done by graduate students.

We’ll have a big job in curating our collection and series, but fortunately, we’ll have the support and expertise of the Libraries to help.
This what users see when they click on a particular entry within a series. The entry offers keywords (designated by the department that owns the collection), a DOI number, and a recommended citation entry. Users can download the document if a full-text is available or find a copy in their libraries, if they are non-Purdue users or if full-text isn’t available. If full-text is forthcoming, e-Pubs offers a feature that allows users to be notified when the document will be available for download in the future.

Users also have the ability to follow authors and stay notified of any new scholarship by a particular author.

The infrastructure of E-Pubs allows the Purdue Libraries to work with authors and journals to disseminate information. The goal isn’t to replace traditional and expected means of dissemination and delivery but to create another venue—a central storehouse of information not unlike the WAC Clearinghouse and other repositories.

Working with the Libraries (instead of designing and maintaining our own separate repository), allows us to focus on doing the research itself, and it creates more opportunities for others (particularly those in other fields) to find our work.
And this is an example of a particular series within a collection for the Joint Transportation Research Program. This series contains technical reports, and it provides a model for how we might disseminate work such as our usability research, which we conducted in 2006 and 2011. We have plans to start more usability testing this fall, so a series devoted to usability reports—or technical reports in general to encompass a broader range of research and reporting on writing center technology or other kinds of practitioner research that won’t be presented as an article or conference presentation—will be a necessary addition to the Writing Lab’s collection.
So how does having a research repository, specifically a collection within e-Pubs, shape and affect the narrative of the Writing Lab at Purdue?

Disseminating our research more broadly and being more inclusive about what we include as research adds another dimension to our narrative, to the overall story about the Purdue Writing Lab. Those within and outside writing centers will see, through our research, what we value and what we do. Having a central location for all these documents is convenient and useful.
As mentioned previously, our Writing Lab collaborated with an Institutional Rhetorics graduate seminar to generate ideas for the repository. The students in the seminar showed us options for hosting the repository, and the act of researching and proposing these options—and later participating in the development of the repository—has given these writing program administrators-in-training opportunities to develop expertise in archival work and work within the institution at large.

Now that we’re collaborating with the Purdue Libraries to host the repository through e-Pubs, we’ll be taking advantage of existing infrastructure. The Libraries have the resources and expertise to maintain the site—even though we have responsibility in curating and developing our collection and series. Also, being included with other departments and centers on campus allows us to participate in an interdisciplinary conversation about and interdisciplinary representations of research. This is not a writing centers-only repository—not that there’s anything wrong with that. E-Pubs is not limited to English studies or Liberal Arts and includes a vast array of academic units across campus. The Writing Lab’s participation also adds to the overall institutional narrative of Purdue University.

Furthermore, housing our repository at e-Pubs means that we can support the missions of both the Writing Lab and the Libraries in openly sharing research and making research more accessible.

Importance of Collaboration

- Draws upon and develops the expertise of administrators-in-training.
- Connects to existing infrastructure and interdisciplinary representations of research.
- Supports the mission of the Libraries and the Writing Lab in promoting open access research.
As many of you know, Purdue’s Writing Lab has promoted free and easy access to information through the OWL, and we do so because the OWL is a fulfillment of Purdue’s Land Grant Mission. The Morrill Act identified the mission of land grant institutions as one of providing practical education and activities to a broad segment of the population, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged. Although the research repository may not benefit a broad segment the way the OWL does, it does still fulfill the Land Grant Mission because information remains free and as easily accessible as possible to a wide range of audiences. These audiences might include researchers at Purdue and elsewhere, administrators at Purdue and elsewhere, and even other writing center administrators.

And if many or all writing centers could widely disseminate their work, we might have a different model for something like the Writing Centers Research Project. This means less pressure for one institution to compile useful data for everyone. And, with more writing centers in different contexts participating, more stories and voices join in with multiple narratives. And we have a less less monolithic and singular narrative overall.
What we’re doing at Purdue is just one way in which writing centers can use research to tell their stories. If more writing centers administrators conducted research, disseminated research more widely, or even reconsidered traditional notions of research to include administrative or technical work—then we’ll have an evolving collection of narratives that describe writing centers in a multi-faceted way, and this begins to dismantle the limited writing center grand narrative.

As individual writing centers or as a whole, we would have much more control over our identities and stories because we get to define what we disseminate and how. And having new ways to share information and stories adds to the existing ways in which writing center work is shared.

Positioning writing centers as site of research and sites that conduct research strengthens writing centers as a whole. Plus, as institutions change, which they inevitably do, we can be less reactive and more proactive. We don’t have to depend upon others to tell our stories, and we won’t have to fit our work within a single box.

Why not articulate our own language for what we do, within the contexts that we do this work, and leverage institutional infrastructures when we can?