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## Writing Centers, Enclaves, and Creating Spaces of Change Within Universities

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Writing Centers, Enclaves, and Creating Spaces of Change Within Universities

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**Abstract** Writing center scholarship often highlights the ways in which their distinctive, less directive, nongraded, and individualized instruction can make them distinctive social and pedagogical spaces. There is a simultaneous argument, however, that writing centers are often institutionally vulnerable and may be unable to engage in or promote such differences within the larger college or university. Yet, despite their size and possible vulnerability, the daily practices and institutional positioning of writing centers can help change conversations and work toward a different vision, political approach, and institutional presence. Drawing on Victor Friedman's concept of "enclaves of different practice" and Brian Massumi's theories of affect, this article explores how writing centers can adopt a theory of institutional change grounded in social fields and relationships. If, as Friedman advocates, institutions can be changed from the "inside out" through attention to empowering relationships and reconfiguring social fields, writing centers can adopt dispositions and practices to create the environments from which futures can emerge that sustain their values. The article provides brief examples of how a writing center can explicitly frame and promote pedagogical and participatory values to work toward larger institutional and political change.

**Keywords** writing center administration, participatory organization, institutional change, social spaces

## Introduction

Some days, you just don't want to open your email. The problems colleges and universities face, and the institutional policies writing program administrators and faculty find ourselves facing, pour in, day after day. The issues are pressing: ongoing reductions in government funding, rising tuition, growing use of contingent labor, increasing regimes of standardized assessment, and ongoing institutional racism, misogyny, homophobia, ableism, and more. And this is the list I compiled before the challenges raised by the global pandemic, antiracist

social justice protests, and the turbulent political landscape. Unfortunately, to address these very real problems, upper-level university administrators too often turn to the strategies and language of neoliberal management and economic culture, such as outsourcing, contingent labor, automation, and standardization. Such approaches often do not reflect the kinds of pedagogy and conceptions of literacy that scholarship in our field argues are crucial for teaching writing. As faculty, we may shake our heads in anger or opposition, but are often uncertain about how to respond beyond outraged emails or resigned shrugs.

Even when we want to resist, we may face real limitations. Our writing centers may be small and institutionally vulnerable. Also, the daily work of teaching and program administration can leave little time and less energy for resistance and revolution. Despite our sometimes dispiriting circumstances, however, I believe that writing centers can play an ongoing role in modeling and advocating for values they find important. The ability to push back and to articulate a more just and humane vision of higher education requires a theory and a process that is also feasible within the demands and constraints of our positions and daily work.

The challenges we face in our programs are varied, local, and overlapping. My intent in this article, then, is not to focus on one specific issue. Instead I am suggesting a theory, disposition, and process to help us approach the distinctive local questions that often face writing program administrators and faculty. How do we envision our goals as affecting not just our program, but the larger institution? As small, often institutionally vulnerable organizations, what framework and process can be part of those decisions? How do we make our political position and our goals for change more than just a mission statement, but part of ongoing, daily work?

I approach these questions through Victor Friedman's (2011) concept of "enclaves of different practice" to discuss how writing centers can draw on their pedagogical and participatory values and practices to foster a different vision, a different political approach, and a different institutional presence. My understanding of enclaves of different practice is as a theory and disposition that helps us frame and reflect on our decisions and work toward restructuring social fields and relationships. I begin with a brief discussion of some of the ways that writing center scholarship has addressed questions of institutional and political spaces. I then turn to how I understand our institutional position using Friedman's concept of "enclaves of different practice." I discuss how his understanding of the social fields and relationships that form institutions can serve as a framework for how we conceive of and enact our daily and long-term work from the inside out, rather than top down. I connect this approach to Brian Massumi's (2015) understanding of

affect and narrative in creating micropolitical moments that can work toward larger change. I end with a few brief examples of how I have applied this framework and disposition to how we understand, plan, and articulate our daily work in our University Writing Center to the rest of the university. The examples are not intended as evidence of how we have solved all our problems or completely remade the university, but instead to illustrate the process of how thinking as an enclave informs our decisions, our questions, and our goals in a variety of contexts. Despite what may indeed be relatively weak institutional positions, our ongoing goal is to create humane and learning-focused experiences for students that run counter to many of the dominant cultural conceptions of the university, writing, and students that we find so troubling.

## Writing Centers and Institutional Power

In order to think about how we might want to situate a program as an enclave that works toward institutional change, it is helpful to recognize and reflect on the history and critiques of the presence of such programs as well as the tensions that always mark their institutional locations, power, and ideologies.

Scholarship about writing centers has often argued, or assumed, that the distinctive, less directive, nongraded, and individualized instruction that takes place within centers also makes them distinctive social and pedagogical spaces within colleges and universities (Boquet, 2002; Geller et al, 2007; Hall, 2017). At the same time, the institutional presence and position of writing centers received a significant amount of attention, often focusing on practical issues such as long-range planning, budgets, marketing, and assessment (Childers, 2006; Havigland et al., 2001; Owens, 2008). While such discussions also often note the fluid, and sometimes vulnerable, institutional positions we inhabit, in fact our institutional positions are often complicated. Reviewing information from the Writing Centers Research Project and the National Census on Writing, as well as the scholarly publications, indicates an

ever increasing number of writing centers are secure, well-established parts of their colleges and universities (Salem, 2014).

Of course, greater institutional recognition and stability also means more integration with systems and values of the larger institution, which has been part of the concern of the critiques of the political and institutional position of writing centers. Rather than perceive themselves as marginalized and powerless, some have argued that writing centers should argue for their differences in practices and values as strengths (Geller et al., 2007; Lerner, 2019; McNamee & Miley, 2017; Mullin et al., 2006). Nancy Grimm (1996, 1999) argued that writing centers should work more critically to unpack institutional and ideological assumptions about writing and encourage critical consciousness for tutors and writers. Elizabeth Boquet (2002) provided an incisive critique of the ways in which the language and mechanisms of efficiency have shaped institutional expectations of writing centers, and how we have often responded by complying with those expectations. She argued for resisting the pressure for proving our efficiency and service by making room in our tutoring and practices for the inefficiencies that allow for exploration and knowledge. More recently, Lori Salem (2014) and Laura Greenfield (2019) have illustrated how larger political and cultural narratives and ideologies pressure writing centers toward particular institutional identities.

The institutional identities with which writing centers become entwined of course also reproduce dominant cultural ideologies of power and identity that privilege some groups in the institution while excluding or marginalizing others. There has been a necessary and robust critique of such institutional positioning and how it complicates what is often a common writing center narrative of caring and service (Camarillo, 2019; Greenfield, 2019; McKinney, 2013). This conversation has been an important exploration of the complicity of writing centers in dominant cultural systems and narratives such as white supremacy, ableism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and more (Daniels et al., 2015; Denny, 2010; Haltiwanger Morrison & Nanton, 2019; Napoleone, 2019; Sicari, 2019; Suhr-Sytsma & Brown, 2011; Villanueva, 2006).

Many writing center directors and staff have responded to such analysis with activist positions that seek to position their writing centers as agents of social justice and change.

At the same time as these critiques, there is also a cautionary discussion of whether it is possible to engage in or promote change in the larger university. In serving the writing of course assignments from across the institution, writing centers are inextricable from the dominant narratives and conceptions of knowledge creation, writing, language, and teaching that regard writing and learning in much more rigid ways and the writing centers' function as "fixing" what is regarded as defective and deficient (Grimm, 1999; Owens, 2008). For many of us, in order to remain functioning, we find ways to communicate in the discourse of the institution, providing the required assessments and numbers to keep administrators satisfied. As universities adopt more neoliberal strategies of austerity, privatization, and market-driven ideologies, the institutional emphasis on quantitative measures of efficiency, contingent labor, and "fixes"—technological and otherwise—only puts more pressure on writing center administrators to align with ideologies and narratives of the corporate university (Horner, 2015; Welch & Scott, 2016). The relentless, totalizing ideological power of such university structures can seem overwhelming and leave a writing center director inclined to prioritize survival above all.

Even in the face of these challenges, however, I believe there are ways we can act more intentionally to try to be agents of institutional change. Rather than argue for a specific plan for a specific problem, I want to argue instead for a foundational positioning, an overarching disposition and process that can help us shape and promote the ideas and practices we value in both daily practices and long-range planning. At this point I want to turn to the idea of "enclaves of different practice" as such a foundation.

## Social Fields and Enclaves

Victor Friedman (2011), sociologist and participatory organizational theorist, describes a situation, early in his teaching career, when

he tried to engage in organizational change, but was frustrated by an organization—and people in that organization—who did not share his values and practices. “It was like hitting a wall. When I tried to push this wall back, it pushed back at me” (p. 234). He describes increasingly feeling that he was trapped in a “dark and suffocating space” (p. 234). Although our descriptions might not be quite so intense, most writing program administrators have felt some measure of hitting walls, or having walls closing in on them, when the culture and organization of larger institution of which they are a part acts in ways that feel antithetical to their program’s values and practices. Friedman understands such experiences and perceptions within organizations as grounded in social fields and relationships and theorizes how change might happen within the social world of organizations.

Friedman maintains that if we focus solely on official institutional structures and policies, we miss the often more important influence of unwritten “rules of the game” that determine what can be accomplished in an institution. He turns to Lewin’s idea of “social space,” Bourdieu’s conception of “habitus,” and Cassirer’s ideas about “relational thinking” to focus on how relationships shape social fields and their customs and unwritten rules. Friedman defines social fields as social spaces in which people recognize and reproduce a set of common behaviors and meanings (pp. 248–250). In an institution such as a college or university, some social fields exist more formally, such as a student advising office or a College of Arts and Sciences, while other social fields are less formal, such as international students or faculty who assign research writing. Social fields are dynamic, often overlapping, and may extend beyond a particular institution. At any time we are members of multiple social fields, though at any given moment some fields may be more relevant to us and to others. In this article, however, I am focusing on the social fields we inhabit in our specific college or university.

A social field is dynamic and is shaped by and reacts to our interactions with others. Each interaction affects all others in that field, even if in limited and almost unnoticeable ways (p. 243). The ongoing interactions in a field

become sedimented to create shared narratives, customs, expectations, as well as explicit policies and rules. These narratives and rules create “meaning,” which is what Friedman sees as holding social fields together, acting in ways similar to the way gravity works on objects in the physical world (p. 248). The social field of a writing center is shaped by the interactions of consultants, writers, staff, administration who, over time, agree on and practice particular approaches to talking about writing, such as focusing on revision and the importance of attending to both sentence-level and conceptual writing concerns. The shared meaning of a social field also explains to us why we are there, who we are expected to be, and how we should act in that social space, both in terms of explicit regulations and, more crucially, in unwritten rules and strategies. A writer who is new to a writing center and may initially expect an editing service will learn, both explicitly and implicitly, about the more dialogic approaches to teaching and learning that take place. Every action in a field that accords to its prescribed customs and narratives recreates and reinforces the meaning of that social space.

We internalize the unwritten rules and practices of a given social field and identify them, in both thought and feeling, as “normal,” even if we might dislike that perceived normality. Even as I may dislike the budget allocation and funding mechanisms at my institution, I do respond to them as established and the boundaries within which I have to work to get our funding. Crucially, relationships and interactions in a social field shape our sense of not just what is allowed, but what we imagine can be possible. These rules and perceptions, both explicit and implicit, construct and maintain relations of power, which as Foucault (1977) and others point out, also are often internalized and normalized by all of those involved.

Social fields are dynamic and continually recreating themselves, and relations and meaning can change, both for individuals and within a range of relationships. A single action or an ongoing series of actions can result in new configurations of relationships and change our expectations and assumptions about what is expected or normalized and, more important, what is possible. For Friedman, “organizational

change can be framed as expanding the realm of the possible” within a given social field (p. 245). The established meanings that define social fields always contain ambiguities and tensions, which allow for gaps to form in the meaning-making and the possibility for a change in those agreed-upon meanings—or what is perceived as appropriate and possible—to take place (p. 249). The shift in how many writing centers are approaching issues of language use and the teaching of writing is an example of disruption in the meaning of how writing was taught, both in writing centers and in the larger institution. The changes are still contested, but there has been a shift in what is being discussed as being possible. Such shifts in meaning structures can be disruptive and dramatic and result in the dissolution of a social field, or they may be cumulative, gradual, and result in smaller-scale reconfigurations of understanding. Other theorists from a range of perspectives (Bhabha, 1994; Collins, 2002; de Certeau, 1984; Martinez, 2014) have argued for ways in which oppositional narratives and actions can shift social meanings. What Friedman’s focus provides is a disposition for attending to our position, and the positions of others, in the social fields of institutions and what can be gained by attending to the effects of our actions and reactions with others. While we cannot always be cognizant of all the social fields in which we are interacting, Friedman proposes that we can attend to relevant fields around specific issues or problems and our relative position to others in such fields, even those we may not think of as affected by our actions. For example, administrators in other departments may not be directly interested in a decision I make, but they notice the decision and its aftermath, which may reinforce their sense of the meaning that defines that field.

A common metaphor for organizational change is to regard it as either top-down, or bottom-up. Friedman, however, proposes that change might be thought of as either outside in, through changes in rules, or inside out, through changes in relationships. While it is often necessary to try to change the explicit rules in an institution, Friedman points out that “changes in the rules of the game are unlikely to have any real impact if they are not carried into practice

at the level of relationships” (p. 246). If, for example, we create a policy about plagiarism—seeing it as an opportunity for instruction and avoiding plagiarism detection software—but many instructors are not sharing our meaning of plagiarism in the social field we share, the field will continue to reproduce the dominant meaning in how writing is taught. If, however, we attend to recreating relations and meaning in a social field of an organization, we might, even from a less powerful position, work from “inside out” toward changing the perceptions of what is considered to be regular or possible and reframe the accepted conventions and goals of the field.

Friedman is interested in those moments when our values or practices are at odds with the larger organization, the larger social field, and identifies six “trajectories” available when the social field changes or is in need of change. These trajectories range from differentiation by changing perceptions of a problem; “knowing one’s place” by accepting the dominant rules of the game; “migration” by moving to a more advantageous position in the field; “emigration” by leaving the field; and “transformation,” by creating large-scale change in the core values of the field (pp. 251–252). In a situation with an organization such as a writing center that is in some way in conflict with a larger institution or culture some of these options are unfeasible, such as emigration. Other trajectories, such as migration or knowing one’s place, would not resolve the problem. And some, like transformation, are just wishful thinking.

It is Friedman’s remaining trajectory, of “forming enclaves,” that offers what I believe are productive ideas for writing center administrators. Friedman maintains that there may be more possibilities for change than we recognize in a given social field. He describes enclaves as spaces within a larger social field where different values and conventions allow for different relationships or ways of interacting. Not only do enclaves operate differently, but they can work to influence the larger social field through their different values and practices, “thus expanding the range of the possible and changing the established rules of the game” (p. 253). Rather than focus only on specific policies or structures we might like to

change, the concepts of social fields and enclaves offer us a way to take what Friedman describes as a relational disposition toward creating change.

For me, “enclave thinking” and focusing on relational change is not a set of specific policy goals or demands, but is a disposition and a process that asks me to think, in each situation and decision, about the effects my actions will have on those who share the field. Such an approach asks me to reflect on my location in relation to others in the field and to consider what customs and unwritten rules I am following when considering a decision or initiative. And then I see enclave thinking as encouraging me to ask questions about how my decision might affect others in the social field. What customs or unwritten rules am I following? What other possibilities am I not considering? Given the narratives and expectations of the field, how will others react? How will they understand my decision or idea given the meanings that currently define this field? Am I satisfied with that interpretation? Are there gaps in meaning that will complicate what I want to do, or allow me to change the positions and relations within the social field to reconstruct or redefine meaning? I think of this disposition as different from more straightforward political strategizing about how to achieve a specific goal in the institution. Instead, enclave thinking pushes me to step back and think about how the sedimented actions of our ongoing work will accumulate in ways that might effect long-term changes in the social fields that shape what is possible in institutions. I don’t expect, or always want, every decision to change social fields, but I want to be attentive to the ways in which every decision will have cumulative effects on such fields. And, when I do want to work to change the values of the larger institution, I think of it as something that may happen through policy, but will also need to happen through relationships.

### **Affect, Emotion, Narrative, and Social Fields**

Friedman notes, but does not have room to address, the importance of attending to affect, emotion, and narrative, on both individual

and organizational levels, to reconfigure social fields (p. 249). In rhetoric and composition, and in recent research in psychology, there has been an ongoing discussion about how facts, by themselves, are not always sufficient to change minds or behaviors. There has been more attention given to the ways in which relationships and narratives can have a substantial influence on how people understand issues, identity, and their sense of community (Kurtyka; 2015; Micciche, 2007; Royster & Kirsch; 2012; Williams, 2018) and a similar discussion of how relationships and social networks influence the work within and around writing programs (Adler-Kassner; 2008; Goldblatt, 2007; Nichols, 2019). If we want to change relations in social fields, often over time through sedimented actions and interactions, I think it is important to focus on the role of affect, emotion, and narratives in institutional change.

Brian Massumi (2015), a philosopher and social theorist, describes affect as a “human gravitational field” (p. 17) in which the actions and reactions of individuals in a social field create “potential attraction, collision, orbit, of potential centripetal and centrifugal movements” (p. 17). Affect and emotion are present in every interaction, not just when they are most noticeable in more extreme moments of joy or sorrow. Our minds are *always* experiencing, monitoring, and categorizing affect as emotions, even when we understand it as calmness or security. Each experience with another person produces affect, which is then interpreted as emotion in the context of our previous experiences. Similar sets of emotional experiences are internalized and normalized into dispositions that regulate how we feel and understand our identities and different social fields (Wetherell, 2012).

At the same time, in our interactions with others, we communicate narratives about ourselves, interpret their narratives, and construct narratives about our relationships. Such narratives, also mediated by affect, are vital to the autobiographical memories we construct and then perform to others (Ferryhough, 2012). If social fields are changed through sedimented experiences, those experiences are made comprehensible, to ourselves and others, through



the emotions and narratives we construct. What's more, as we and our colleagues interact, on behalf of our program, with others in an institution we construct emotional experiences and narratives that become associated with our program (Williams, in press).

When we act in an institutional social field, we may think first in terms of outside-in policies or decisions—we create a policy, achieve an outcome, make a daily decision about a question from a student or teacher. That action, however, affects the relations in a number of social fields. We may reinforce and reproduce the existing meaning, relationships, and processes in a field. Or, we may create new affective intensities that can change how people interpret their relations with others (Massumi, 2015). New narratives, new meanings of the social field can emerge and, perhaps, change the sense of what is possible. Progress, in this context, is not understood as a set of linear achievements, but as the ongoing process of restructuring social fields (Friedman, 2011). Such an approach resonates with ecological models of planning and organization (Facer, 2011) where, instead of focusing solely on planning for specific, codified goals, the aim of planning is to create participatory social spaces in which sustainable, flexible change can happen.

Enclave thinking can be applied to something large, like a significant policy change, but can be as important to infuse in daily decisions and actions. It is also the case that changes in relations and meaning systems can make people feel upset or vulnerable (Friedman, 2011). Working through an ongoing recreating of narratives and relations can give people the psychological space to process change (Barrett, 2009). Massumi (2015) describes modulating and disrupting expectations in an inviting way so that affective moments create the potential for people to move past entrenched roadblocks to change. Attending to the effects of our actions on relations and social fields as part of both planning and daily work can create a "small, moveable environment of potential" (p. 80) that permeates the narratives, emotional experiences, and institutional identities of a program. Massumi maintains that the potentials created in daily, micropolitical actions and spaces can grow and affect the macropolitical (p. 81).

We have strong traditions in our field of proposing new ways of thinking about our institutional positions, as well as resisting unhelpful centralized administrative ideologies. It may mean acting as "tricksters" and finding tactical ways to resist (Geller et al., 2007), or pushing back against ideologies of quantification and efficiency (Boquet, 2002), or interrogating conventional institutional narratives (Camarillo, 2019; McKinney, 2013). I want to build on these ideas to argue that we can, through attending to relationships, narratives, and emotions, respond more intentionally to the kind of restrictive and discouraging social fields that Friedman describes. Many writing center directors and staff feel marginalized and tentative, without the institutional standing or budgets to mandate change on our own. Still, if lasting change happens from the inside out, at the relational level of social fields, we have the ability to attend to and articulate our values on a daily basis through reframing the narratives and emotions that define meanings in social spaces of the university.

One concern people have raised to me is how one can measure success in working as enclaves of different practices and changing our positions in social fields. I cannot provide an answer grounded in data such as numbers of university-wide policy changes. I can describe different conversations I have with colleagues, students, and upper-level administrators about our work. I can relate stories of consultants who talk about taking our values and dispositions with them into their classrooms and next jobs. As with change in any set of relationships, the evidence is often felt and ephemeral. Yet, simply because we are not producing the kinds of quantitative data privileged by dominant university cultures does not mean that this is not useful pedagogical and institutional work. Conversations and relationships are hard to measure, but crucial for change.

Also, even if we create change through the practices of our enclave, that will never fully exclude us from being implicated in dominant institutional power structures that exclude and oppress others. I am not arguing or assuming that what we are doing will be a definitive answer to any challenge, and I recognize that power is always a problem and that systems

work to reproduce and exclude. The practices in our enclave must also involve ongoing reflection, education, and engagement with the important conversations in our field, addressing these issues from a range of perspectives (Denny, 2010; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011; Haltiwanger Morrison & Nanton, 2019; Perryman-Clark & Craig, 2019; Suhr-Sytsma & Brown, 2011; Villanueva, 2006). Still, attending to affect and narratives and looking for gaps in the meanings of social fields offers another way of attending to and engaging with voices and issues that are unheard and excluded. Creating an ecology in which change can grow also means a willingness to ask hard questions of ourselves and interrogating even those values that we find most fundamental to our work.

In order to offer an idea of how such an approach to constructing enclaves of different practices might look, I'm going to discuss how we frame some of the practices in our University Writing Center to emphasize different relationships and different narratives about writing and teaching. Our practices are not necessarily different from other writing centers; but I will describe how I think about these practices and decisions both in terms of teaching writing, as well as how they will affect relations in different social fields. Each moment, large or small, is a moment of small potential for change, surprise, challenge, safety, or some other way of influencing the meaning of the social field and the rules of the game within that field (Friedman, 2011). What narrative will this reinforce or recreate? What is the affective and emotional impact of this moment? How will this decision or practice reproduce or shift meaning in the field? Is this a hostile or compatible space for this narrative? How can we theorize and reflect among ourselves in ways that can be framed as coherent and intentional attempts to expanding the sense of what is possible within the university?

In the next section, I offer three brief examples of how I approach, and encourage others to approach, both daily and long-term practices through the disposition and processes of enclave thinking and relational change: our daily interactions with writers during tutoring sessions; the creations of an LGBTQ+ Writing Group; and our response to the conditions of

the pandemic. These are not necessarily connected moments. The point is I approached all of them with a disposition toward thinking of our work in terms of enclaves, the social fields we are affecting in the university, and how narratives and experiences can change relations and meanings.

## Articulating Values and Practices

One social field that can be particularly frustrating to a writing center director is the larger campus community's conception of what writing is and how we should teach it. Despite our institutionalized presence and decades of research on writing pedagogy, we still often must confront outdated ideas about writing instruction from faculty and students, from language use to responses to plagiarism. We also often face the still pervasive perception by many of the writing center as an editing fix-it shop. We have all spent years trying to dislodge these seemingly intractable ideas about writing (Ball & Loewe, 2017) and, despite some successes, many unproductive ideas remain tenacious. Even worse, the meaning of writing in this social field can become codified in damaging policies enacted by upper-level administrators, such as standardized writing assessments or plagiarism detection software.

Approaching this question as an enclave of different practices makes me consider, first, the nature of the social field in terms of who is included and what their relations are to each other, including power differentials. In this case, this is a broad, informal field that includes students, faculty, administration, and support staff, and the power systems are hierarchical and relatively explicit. Also, in this case, my sense is that solely outside-in approaches to changing the rules of the game—position papers, mission statements, learning outcomes—have only limited success unless, as Friedman notes, we also move them into practice at the level of relationships. I then consider which relations our actions can productively influence. In my context, though we do our best to reach and talk with faculty and staff, our staffing levels and funding don't

allow us to engage those groups directly in the scale or focus we would like. The more obvious relations we engage with regularly are the hundreds of student writers we see each week. One strategy, then, is to focus on the how the narratives we create in appointments can sediment in ways that may gradually shift, or at least make productive gaps, in the meaning of writing in this field.

Writing centers often point to differences in how they teach writing, compared to traditional courses. In addition to the individual instruction, we start where writers are, often work on an extended timeline, and teach without giving a grade. Such pedagogical approaches privilege work that is dialogic, individualized, patient, and often less explicitly hierarchical. Two seemingly simple strategies, grounded in these pedagogical practices, are ways we work in our university toward shifting the meaning of writing in this field. First, when we work with student writers we articulate, when possible, the reasons behind our pedagogy that may run counter to what they have encountered in their education. Explanations of the theory and research that inform how we understand writing and why we teach as we do are integral to our tutoring practices. For example, we might briefly discuss why we approach response in more dialogic ways, rather than just mark up papers. Or we might talk explicitly about translanguaging theories and how they help us understand the range of language practices students use and have available to them. Or we might talk about how identity and power shape course assignments and how writers might respond to those assignments. It's not that other teachers and tutors in other programs don't also understand these theories, but I have, both as a director of first-year writing and of a writing center, seen many teachers and tutors use these pedagogical approaches without taking the time to explain *why* they use these different approaches. If we have ongoing conversations that make explicit why we teach as we do and that our work is based in research and theory, we offer narratives that counter persistent unhelpful cultural mythologies about teaching writing.

In addition, for many students, their emotional experiences of writing in school have

been marked by disappointment, anxiety, or shame. The meaning of writing instruction in the social field is shaped by relations that are hierarchical and by responses and assessments that feel confusing at best and punitive at worst. Like many writing centers, we attend to the relationships that we develop with writers. Friedman and Massumi and others (Leander & Ehret, 2019; Newkirk, 2017; Wetherell, 2012), while coming from different perspectives, all discuss the importance of understanding the role of affect and emotion in interacting with others in constructing shared senses of meaning. And research in motivation and learning is clear that emotional experiences grounded in respect and support lead to stronger internal motivations and more meaningful engagement and learning (Eodice et al., 2017; Sheldon & Schuler, 2015). Providing a more positive emotional experience is not simply giving writers good news, but it is giving writers a different perspective on their identities as writers by assuring them that writing can be learned, that they have ideas worth hearing, and that, while there may be significant work ahead, they can meet the writing challenges they face. Writing centers can increase writers' self-efficacy and perceptions of agency (Hixson-Bowles & Powell, 2019; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013; Williams, 2018). I maintain that, in drawing on both Friedman and Massumi, the different emotional experiences students can have in writing center appointments can alter what they may regard as possible within the social field of writing in the university. Our tutoring practicum includes attention to how emotion, memory, and motivation influence student learning and perceptions of agency, as well as how, within the work of a writing consultation, we can teach students about these aspects of writing and identity. When writers leave our Writing Center telling us they feel more confident, less anxious, more in control of their writing, we want them to understand that working toward positive emotional dispositions is intentional on our part and a different way of learning in the university. We are not alone as a writing center in working to provide alternative educational models and experiences. What I am arguing, however, is that we can be explicit and public about the values that shape the relational

project of our pedagogical practices. When our tutors go on to teach in the classroom, I know that some of them continue to bring such conversations into their teaching. At the same time, some writers will take the narratives and experiences from the Writing Center and pass them on, in conversations large and small, to others in the social field, including students, faculty, and even parents. Each action, each different narrative about writing, affects others in the social field. As both Massumi and Boquet point out, ongoing microscopic changes, what might be said at one moment of one tutoring session, can accumulate toward macroscopic changes and perceptions of what is possible. In the thousands of writing consultations we have each year, there are thousands of opportunities for such moments.

### **Not Just a Service, a Statement**

If the previous idea about social fields addresses the perceptions of writing in the institution, the next addresses the idea of the writing center. I want our University Writing Center to create a narrative and institutional identity that promotes and sustains ideas about writing as political and activist. Though this happens in our tutoring, we also regard our events, writing groups, social media, and community partnerships as elements to create and circulate different political and institutional narratives about writing, learning, and identity.

Like many writing centers, we facilitate a variety of different writing-focused activities beyond one-on-one tutoring. We sponsor regular writing groups for graduate students, creative writers, and students who identify as LGBTQ+. We also organize a range of writing-related events, from an annual celebration of International Mother Language Day to Banned Books Week events to letter writing in support to local refugees to open mic nights to faculty roundtable discussions on issues of writing, politics, and identity. We have an active social media presence, including a blog that draws readership from on campus and beyond that engages issues of writing pedagogy and writing politics. And we have ongoing community writing partnerships with a local

nonprofit that supports single mothers attending college and with a local branch of the public library. As we plan and engage in all these activities, we do so with intentional thought about how they will affect not only the participants, but also our institutional identity and, by extension, social fields in the university.

Take as an example, the LGBTQ+ Writing Group. The idea came from one of our graduate student assistant directors, Laura Tetreault, and is an example of how the ecology of our own social field can generate inside-out ideas that alter what we imagine as possible. I immediately said “yes,” but also began to think about what social fields and what relations the formation of this group would engage. Although the larger social field of the university is always important, and students simply walking by our University Writing Center seeing signs advertising the group had their understanding of our organization shifted a bit, my focus in enclave thinking this time focused on two more specific social fields. I saw this as an opportunity to address the social field inhabited by administrators across the university. Administrators, even the ones who generally support the University Writing Center, often still think of us as solely a tutoring service supporting fairly traditional dominant cultural ideologies of what they perceive as “academic writing.” Our events and writing groups create different narratives, gaps in the meaning of the “writing center” in this social field. When we started the LGBTQ+ Writing Group, I emailed the flyer and a description of our goals for the group to different administrators across campus as a start in creating that new narrative. I continue, in meetings with administrators, to talk about that group and our other events and groups, not as add-ons to what we do, but as representative of our social justice mission, each time with an eye toward remaking the meaning of the writing center and writing in that administrative field.

Just as important is that the creation of the LGBTQ+ Writing Group could address the social field of all those in the university community looking for places to write and talk in a supportive space. We wanted to continue to create a narrative in that field that the University Writing Center is a space where we listen, reflect, and learn from voices not in power in

*Williams*

the dominant culture. Such a narrative is not implying that all groups have the same needs and goals. Nor do I think we are some magical space that is always safe for every writer or that forming writing groups is a single solution to any problem. We recognize that we are still part of an organization that excludes many students, faculty, and staff in ways large and small and that our complicity in those ideologies requires ongoing, daily work through listening, education and reflection. We draw from scholarship on counterstorytelling (Collins, 2002; Delgado, 1989; Faison, 2019, Martinez, 2014) that challenges us to think continually about and respond to the narratives and voices and ways of knowing that are not being recognized. When we started the LGBTQ+ Writing Group, I wanted the flyers and announcements not only posted to our social media and the campus LGBTQ Center, but sent to as many other groups and classes as I could think of to try to create a gap in meaning in this social field about the voices and ideas we want to hear and support. Such micropolitical steps do not instantly solve problems; but ongoing practices can alter relations and the sense of what change is possible in social fields.

Our goal is for the campus community to see us as more than a service space on the first floor of the library. We want to sustain narratives about learning and language that recognize the political nature of literacy practices and the potential for writing as both part of community building and as resistance. Part of shifting relationships in a social field is making visible and interrogating power and privilege. We want to be more than a service; we want to be a statement.

## Pandemic Planning

A final example of enclave thinking came with the events of the pandemic.

Like many writer centers, in March 2020 we had to move all our tutoring online. The questions arose the next summer when administrators were making decisions about the plans for the fall semester. Although the university decided to have a combination of online and hybrid courses, I was unconvinced that

traditional, in-person consultations could take place safely. I convinced administrators that a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online appointments would actually allow for more direct interaction than sitting six feet from a writer and shouting through a mask. But, in my arguments for this policy, I was also thinking about the effect on the social field of the University Writing Center staff as well as staff and directors of other student-focused organizations, such as reference librarians and other campus tutoring services. Toward that end, I communicated to these groups, not just the decisions, but also my reasoning. For other organizations like ours, I hoped I could contribute to a narrative emphasizing the physical and affective importance of following CDC protocols as well as the emotional health of both students and staff as central concerns, rather than the central administration narrative of an in-person campus experience that was seemingly driven first by enrollment and budgetary concerns. Budgetary concerns, while legitimate, were rolling over concerns about safety, particularly for staff in student-serving organizations who were often paid less or in part-time positions. In addition, questions of emotional stress and anxiety in campus offices were given little attention and legitimacy by upper-level administration. Some organizations on campus agreed with our narrative, while others responded more to the central administration's narrative. Even so, at a time when many meanings were being challenged and rethought in this social field, such as the meanings of attendance, student care, equity, individual instruction, or student-centeredness, establishing our narrative in detail and repeating it often, in meetings and emails, helped contribute that narrative as part of the meaning that defined the social field and create the possibility for some organizations to work with students online.

For the University Writing Center staff, including the new consultants arriving in the fall, I wanted to emphasize values of safety and physical and mental health first, and what we could achieve in terms of tutoring second. In addition to keeping people safe and supporting student learners, I also thought about the effect this narrative and affective experience could have in this social field of the University

Writing Center staff. Articulating our priorities as physical and mental health first, and being honest about the anxieties I was feeling about being on campus and living through a pandemic, contributed to the narratives they encountered in our social field about the nature and purpose of education. I also knew the narratives within the staff would ripple through the relations with student writers. I wanted to create a narrative and affective experience demonstrating that, in the University Writing Center, the priorities and values guiding education could put people first, embrace flexibility and patience, and acknowledge emotions as not just a legitimate, but a crucial part of our understanding of the institutions and practices of learning. Such a meaning of education could stand in contrast to meanings often privileged in neoliberal corporate universities and focused on enrollment numbers and ideologies of customer service. Such a position echoes Elizabeth Boquet's (2002) *Noise from the Writing Center* and her exploration of how the daily "noise" of writing center work forms a counter-narrative about epistemology and pedagogy to a dominant, corporate university emphasis on "efficiency."

It's also important to talk about places where decisions go against us. For example, I also argued that if we were tutoring online, we could also handle front desk responsibilities of scheduling appointments and fielding questions remotely as well. The administration did not agree to this, and we took turns being the sole person in the physical Writing Center space to field in-person questions (of which there were virtually none). Even though I lost this argument, I believe, with Friedman, that social fields are dynamic and all actions—all facts, narratives, and affect—become part of the meaning of the social field. Like gravitational forces, even losing arguments may in time create gaps in the meaning that provide the opportunity for change.

## Conclusion

The work of being an enclave of different practices is not contained in any single argument or decision. The examples I offer are not a full

program, and none are guaranteed to create change. Shifts in social fields are unpredictable, and sometimes imperceptible on a daily basis, making questions of success hard to define. Still, having been around colleges long enough to see time and energy consumed in enacting policy decisions or rewriting mission statements that were then ignored or ineffective, I find persuasive the idea that attending to the effects of our ongoing practices on relationships and social fields can potentially expand the realm of the possible, both for ourselves and for those in the college or university.

Some people I have talked with about these ideas have criticized this approach as too incremental and not a radical enough challenge to the dominant and damaging ideologies that have taken hold in higher education. That may be true. I'm certainly not opposed to calls and actions focused on large-scale change. Still, I have been in higher education for 30 years and have seen call after call over those years for radical change. Yet here we are. I'm not giving up, but I find Friedman's focus on relational change from the inside out to be something we are positioned to do and can afford to do, both in terms of money and time. I spend most of each day responding to the daily demands of running a writing center and supporting staff and students, and what change I can hope to create I have to do within the limits of my responsibilities as an administrator and teacher, and the fact that I like to hike and play music on the weekends.

As I have written and revised this article, the news has not gotten any better. My university has announced yet another swath of budget cuts and the push for more standardized assessments and surveillance grinds on. Like many of you, I wonder sometimes how writing centers can make do or simply survive for another year as we chart institutional waters that may be indifferent or even hostile. Yet, writing center directors are well-experienced travelers along such routes, and, as some have pointed out, our more marginal positions can also offer more freedom to maneuver. We can have more opportunities to experiment, cross boundaries, and resist restrictive structures and ideologies (Bergmann, 2010; Grimm, 1999; McNamee & Miley 2017; Perryman-Clark & Craig, 2019). I am

persuaded by Lori Salem's (2014) position that we need to understand writing center advocacy as not limited to discussions of our own organizations, but understand that we "live in political spaces—in a stratified and competitive system of higher education, in a polarized national political climate—and in the end there are no neutral positions" (p. 38). I see the strategies suggested by creating and articulating enclaves of different practices as a disposition in our daily work and long-range planning as working through micropolitical moments to challenge macropolitical narratives. We have much to bring to the institution in addition to writing pedagogy. Every time we act on and articulate our values about identity, language, and culture, we create the possibility for those ideas to circulate to other students, faculty, and family and friends outside the university and recreate social fields that will encourage change and nurture those values from the inside out.

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