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Hamlet, Polonius, and the Writing Center

Thomas Nash

Today's writing center director is surely an anomaly, a curious intruder into an academic drama. Like a character in Pirandello's famous play, the laboratory specialist is unsure of his role, insecure about his lines. His *persona's* mask is Janus-faced, looking both to the aims of the professor and the student. In this respect, the writing center director is an intermediary, thrust into the *agon* between protagonist and antagonist only after the initial bloody scenes have been played. As a participant in this academic drama, I find it useful to give literary tags to the characters, borrowing from Shakespeare's best-known play.

As we might expect, the professor plays the lead, often convincing both students and administrators that he is a melancholy Hamlet. The Prince, you may recall, late in the play, chances upon a rustic gravedigger busy at his work. The gravedigger throws out shovelful after shovelful of hard-won soil, laying the rich earth at Hamlet's feet. Hamlet, however, without even dirtying his robes, picks up a worthless old skull and moralizes about it at length. The exhausted gravedigger is no doubt bored and a little perturbed. Unfortunately, the writing teacher often does the same. That is, the toiling freshman offers up shovelful after shovelful of hard-won prose filled with seemingly-fertile arguments and workmanlike comparisons. But from amidst all this rich soil, and with no appreciation for honest labor, this ethereal dandy plucks out a meaningless bone to pick, filling the substantial margins with trivia and moralizing about it at length. The student is no doubt bored and a little perturbed.

Many of today's undergraduates, especially the freshmen, would probably agree that their professors play the role of Hamlet to perfection. At least that is the judgment of Richard C. Veit of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington:

Many students visit our writing labs desperate if not (even worse) discouraged into apathy. They come with themes that have received F's for having too many comma splices, or with papers whose margins are filled

with red AWK's and FRAG's or with numbers which refer back to sections in their handbooks. Such comments are not written by teachers trying to offer the most helpful possible advice but by "evaluators" who see themselves as disinterested judges or (worse) guardians of standards and screeners-out of the incompetent. Students who have been their victims need desperately to have their own worth affirmed as well as to be taught some real lessons about writing.¹

Although it is easy to point accusing fingers at such professors, it is also true that the typical freshman writer can easily exhaust the patience of even the most dedicated writing teachers. In many ways public education has encouraged the student to play the part of Polonius—a vacillator, an equivocator, a speaker with no valid sense of audience. I must admit that I have often thought of that rambling old fool when reading student papers that begin, "There are a lot of similarities between apartment life and dormitory life, but mainly there are some differences."

The most taxing role in this drama, of course, is that of the writing center director, who must somehow mitigate the conflict between professor and student and yet avoid the deadly ire of both. The situation is made more complex by procedures. In most cases, the professor remains offstage, sending only a bloody message with the student. As a result, it is often possible for tutors and directors to sympathize with the student and to mutter unwisely about the destructive comments that sully the margins of failed papers. Furthermore, because writing center personnel must often depend on the student's explanation of the exact nature of the assignment, tutors commonly become willing accomplices in making revisions that completely misjudge the nature or scope of the writing task. It is small wonder that a growing number of writing center directors are gaining the reputation of Iagos.

Many of these problems, it seems to me, could be alleviated by the writing center director who insists on entering the composing process *before* the denouement. In short, the writing center should be a resource center for the student during all stages of composing, especially during the difficult trials of invention. Ideally, the prewriting process should begin at the writing center.

Many center directors have foreseen the need for prewriting instruction and have allowed their centers to evolve from proofreading stations to full-service centers. For instance, Ken Bruffee at Brooklyn College has employed peer-group tutoring as a device for aiding invention, allowing student critics and discussion leaders to tap sources of information that the student-writers had been unaware of. Says Bruffee, the typical student writers at Brooklyn College "did not believe in the capacity of their own minds to generate ideas from their own experience, whether in life or in the library. They appeared intellectually paralyzed . . . Yet given the opportunity to talk with sympathetic peers, these same students

seemed to discover knowledge they did not know they had. They could identify and examine issues in these subjects, take positions on them, and defend their positions in ways they (and some of their teachers) had not thought possible."² Of course, to a certain extent, the problems at Brooklyn College are "of this time and of that place," so that such prewriting confabs need not be the answer for all writing centers. However, modified versions of the Brooklyn Plan are now in operation throughout the country, even at much different institutions such as California-Berkeley, where Thom Hawkins and his staff have adopted Bruffee's basic procedures but have tailored the group work to the distinctive academic climate.³

At other institutions peer-group tutoring is not appropriate, and other methods of generating ideas have been applied at the writing centers. For example, the tutors at Carnegie-Mellon University begin their initial sessions with students by having them fill out a preliminary questionnaire that leads inevitably to a discussion of the writing process. As Anita Brostoff, the center director, says in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, "The answers to these questions show clearly to what extent the student has a sense of writing as process. And not surprisingly, the answers usually reveal, as Janet Emig and others have found out, that there is little formal planning and little revision; that students often begin the paper the night before it is due, write one draft, and then type it."⁴ Even though the Carnegie-Mellon staff ascribe to no formal heuristics for writing, they advertise a willingness to help students "in all parts of the writing process," including invention. The preliminary questionnaire, it seems, is a fine means of leading the student toward an effective prewriting strategy.

Perhaps the most energetic attempt to stress prewriting techniques may be found at Beaver College in Pennsylvania. In this now-famous program the entire faculty of the university have been trained in collaborative learning techniques. As a result, the whole campus serves as a sounding board for ideas that can be incorporated into student papers. Furthermore, the Writing Center is just the axis of a web that extends from one end of the campus to the other, even to the student dormitories where peer tutors are available well into the night. Central to the Beaver College Plan is the notion that initial drafts are intended as means of discovering information. The student combines *incubation* and *articulation* phases, to use James Britton's terms, so that, in early drafts, "students can be encouraged to explain their ideas mainly to themselves, without worrying immediately about the needs of an anonymous reader."⁵ Under this system, developed by center director Elaine Maimon, papers are considered "unfinished" rather than inadequate, and the task of discovering, rethinking, and revising continues in *all*

disciplines until the student-writer designates a paper ready for evaluation.

These are but a few of the universities where the writing center directors have insisted on viewing the art of composition as a dramatic act, choosing to enter the process somewhere before the final curtain. Admittedly, I cannot contend that discourse theorists would agree in unison that all the programs that I have outlined teach strategies that could be called invention. Without doubt I have used the term *prewriting* in its broadest sense. Moreover, I am certain that a comprehensive survey of writing laboratories in America would reveal a number of tutorial plans that begin with a study of Aristotelian *topoi*, Burke's dramatic pentad, Pike's tagmemics, or Lauer's problem-solving techniques, to name a few accepted heuristics. Unfortunately, in an informal survey that I made through the mails this past winter, I discovered that most writing centers still do not provide a wide range of services, and in many there is no attempt at prewriting instruction or guidance. These centers are merely repair stations, like the school infirmaries, admirably prepared for patching the cuts and bruises of student papers, but hopelessly inept at dealing with ideas and concepts that may be cancerous to the core.

It would be judicious for writing center directors to recall the words of Janet Emig as she analyzes the writing abilities of college-bound twelfth-graders:

One could say that the major kind of essay too many students have been taught to write is algorithmic, or so mechanical that a computer could be programmed to produce it: when a student is hurried or anxious, he simply reverts or regresses to the only program he knows, as if inserting a single card into his brain.⁶

When these pre-formed, predictable arguments come flowing from the pen of a freshman writer, whose main goal may be to protect a vulnerable ego, the tendency toward spelling, punctuation, and usage errors is vastly increased, so that the job of the writing center tutor becomes more difficult. Few scholars, I think, would disagree that a direct correlation exists between effective prewriting strategies and clear, correct composition. Needless to say, an expanded emphasis on heuristics for invention, both in the classroom and in the writing center, would pay multiple benefits.

Despite ample training in classical and modern rhetoric, many of our composition faculty have forgotten the exalted role of invention in the composing process. From Plato to Piaget to Kenneth Pike, scholars have described the creative dissonance that necessarily precedes original thought and clear expression. Remarkably, many of our number have ignored this phase of the writer's struggle, as if composing were no more difficult than placing paper in the Smith-Corona, plunking out the letters *t-h-e*, and awaiting the creative muses. Anyone who has read Thurber

knows that, sooner or later, such a trusting writer is likely to find himself completing this sentence with a cryptic “The hell with it!”

Writing, of course, is a sweet agony. The frustrations are many, but the occasional inspired phrase or clever trope makes the bitter soon sweet. For the young Polonius, however, writing seldom has any charms. Fair or not, it increasingly falls to the writing center to reduce the student’s sense of acting in an absurdist drama. Several steps might increase the effectiveness of the writing center. First, the tutors and staff must aggressively seek first-hand information about what happens in the composition classrooms. I know too many writing center directors who feel isolated from their colleagues, closeted away in a converted boilerroom, awaiting unknown assignments with unsharpened critical tools. At Auburn University we have tried to reduce this communications gap by having professors and tutors share a common paradigm taken from Maxine Hairston’s *A Contemporary Rhetoric*.⁷ Also all tutors are provided with a complete syllabus of writing assignments before the beginning of each quarter. At the very least, I would hope, writing center directors should see that their tutors acquire copies of assignments and materials from all the contributing writing classes.

Second, the writing center director should acquaint tutors with traditional methods of invention, from brainstorming to field theory.⁸ This step is important not only to develop better writing skills among center visitors, but to fulfill our obligations to educate and inform our tutors, whether they be graduate assistants or undergraduate employees. Admittedly, some methods of discovery may be initially beyond the ken of peer-group tutors or new graduate students; but there are always prewriting strategies available to tutors until they learn the subtleties of tagmemics or the dramatic pentad.

Third, I will admit that a number of writing assignments do not lend themselves well to one of the established heuristics for invention. In this case, the writing center director might choose the most rewarding path: to create paradigms that are specifically designed for common writing assignments. For example, at Central Michigan University a recurring assignment for beginning writers asks the students to “write a portrait or profile of someone especially close to you. Include enough details so that an outsider can sense your relationship to the person.”⁹ When the student arrives at the writing center, forming with her lips the words “I don’t know where to begin,” her tutor offers the following questionnaire:

Today’s assignment involves prewriting for a character sketch. First, discuss with your tutor the person you have chosen to study. Then make a catalogue of what you know about him or her by answering, in your notebooks, the questions below.

1. What single word (friend, priest, lover, confidant, mentor, tormenter) best describes this person and the relationship you share?

2. Has that relationship changed since your first meeting? If so, in what ways?
3. Is there a single event or moment or incident that best describes your relationship with that person? Describe briefly.
4. Your tutor will rapidly mention ten personality traits or physical features (fat, nasty, clever, melancholy). Write down, without pausing to think, the first words that come to mind as you consider your character (slightly chubby, quite pleasant, A-student, moody).
5. Is any of the answers to item 4 the most notable characteristic of your subject? If not, try to decide which other characteristic you most often notice.
6. Think of your character in terms of (a) a movie character, such as Robert Redford or Annie Hall, (b) a comic strip character, or (c) an animal (antelope, ant, sturgeon). Explain some of the reasons for your comparison. Look for a possible analogy here.
7. Write one or two typical sentences that you've heard this person speak (in any situation). Is there a common phrase that he/she uses?
8. Describe a typical outfit that your character wears on Wednesday at noon and a typical outfit for Saturday at 10 p.m.
9. Name a place where this character would probably feel most at home (the gym, biology lab, dorm room, Kiss concert). Why?
10. Name a place where this character would probably feel most uncomfortable (church, Kiss concert, downtown Detroit). Why?
11. Would you be able to have a similar relationship to this person if he/she were (a) changed to the opposite sex, (b) changed to another race of people, (c) aged by twenty years? Which change would have the most profound effect? Why?

It should be clear that the tutor and student-writer can expand any of these questions in the interests of generating ideas about character. Furthermore, the fourth item allows the tutor to interact directly with the student at a point early enough in the prewriting phase that the tutor can use the word-association exercise as the catalyst for even more probing questions. The exercise also allows the student to invent analogies (6) and to speculate about contrast, variation, and distribution (11). This paradigm is also useful as a basis for the discussion of a failed essay that must be completely revised and developed.

These many suggestions for writing center directors are not truly significant answers to all the problems that plague the writing center system. In fact, I have referred to successful programs across the country only to demonstrate the wide range of solutions for those who grew bored with the notion that a writing center is a proofreading station. At these universities, as at Purdue, East Texas State, Montgomery College, and scores of other progressive institutions, writing center directors have joined voices to say that writing is a process, and that an effective laboratory begins its work at the beginning of the process.

For the time being, until the writing center can find its rightful place in

the academic community, the directors of these centers must play a variety of roles with a minimum of direction. In the meantime, let us hope that a pragmatic emphasis on prewriting can upgrade the quality of compositions that reach the desk of Professor Hamlet. It is a big job to deflate the empty rhetoric of each young Polonius.

Footnotes

¹Richard C. Veit, "Are Machines the Answer?" *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 4 (December, 1979), 2.

²Ken Bruffee, "The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Tutoring," *Liberal Education*, 64 (1978), 451.

³See Thom Hawkins, "Dealing with Criticism," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 4 (October, 1979), 2-4.

⁴Anita Brostoff, "An Approach to Conferencing," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 4 (March, 1980), 8.

⁵Elaine P. Maimon, "Talking to Strangers," *CCC*, 30 (1979), 367. Britton divides the composing process into stages of *preparation*, *incubation* and *articulation* in "The Composing Processes and the Functions of Writing," an essay in *Research on Composing: Points of Departure*, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1978), pp. 13-28.

⁶Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1971), pp. 50-53.

⁷The Auburn paradigm has been adapted from *A Contemporary Rhetoric*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1978).

⁸A review of prewriting techniques and theories might begin with Richard Young, "Invention: A Topographical Survey," in *Teaching Composition*, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 1-43 and might include Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1950); Richard E. Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike, *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1971); and W. Ross Winterowd, *Contemporary Rhetoric* (New York: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 39-162.

⁹From James E. Miller, Jr. and Stephen N. Judy, *Writing in Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 60.

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