

1-1-1981

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Tilly Eggers

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Recommended Citation

Eggers, Tilly (1981) "Things Fall Apart: The Writing Center Will Hold," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1050>

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Things Fall Apart: The Writing Center Will Hold

Tilly Eggers

Things fall apart, and they do so pretty regularly in a Writing Center as anyone associated with one knows: favorite exercises mysteriously quit working, popular hours become lag times, examples become outdated, and computers and committed teachers burn out. In the past decade the Writing Center has adjusted to continuing redefinitions of writing—from product to process, from a way of speaking to a way of reading, from a mode of communicating to a mode of thinking, and from an English Department requirement to a cross-curriculum activity. We have all learned that change is the constant of the Writing Center and that, when things do not fall apart, the Center is too fixed. But this everyday uncertainty, which is essential, is not sufficient, much less efficient or comfortable; this necessary flexibility undermines a sense of continuity in the program, in the people involved, and in the finances. We have a big problem, one which makes solutions to smaller problems only tentative and unconvincing. We need a theory to keep us from simply going in circles.

In this paper I want to explore the paradox that for a Writing Center to hold, things must fall apart. What is required is an approach informed by a theory of language as changing. Kenneth Burke's theory of language as symbolic action is such a theory, for it respects both the constancy in language and the change, both *good writing* and *writing which is good* for a specific writer, reader, subject, purpose, and context. As Burke demonstrates, such a theory can encompass language as form—transactional and reader-based. The theory of language as symbolic action is particularly suited to a Writing Center attended by students from all levels and disciplines because it accommodates various kinds of writing and all components of the writing situation, not just the text, nor the author's intentions, nor the audience. This broad theory of

language also offers an alternative to the partial approaches to writing in regular classes, where students are coaxed from single words, to sentences, to paragraphs, and finally to purpose and audience, as if each were a discrete step. The broad theory also denies the linear, step-by-step approach from prewriting, to writing, to rewriting.

The solution I propose might be called “de-centering,” to use the term of Piaget that James Moffett and James Britton base their influential studies on, because the approach makes possible a response to external forces, such as other departments, new definitions of writing, or changes in the economy. But aside from the fact that everyone nowadays is adopting the term, a major problem has developed gradually since its initial usefulness. Translated into a theory of composition, the idea of de-centering has led to the shift of attention from the text to the audience, whether fictional, as Walter Ong proclaims, or functional, as A.D. Van Nostrand practices. This shift, which has certainly led to advances in theory and empirical research on audiences as an heuristic, a revisionary force, a statistical variable, and a psychological reality, is one aspect of the broader movement from product to process, from form to function, from decoding to anticipating and guessing, and from New Criticism to psychoanalytical and deconstructionist criticism. All such moves comprise what J. Hillis Miller calls the “‘Paradigm shift’ from a referential or mimetic view of language to an active or performative one.” This shift from words-as-things to how-to-do-things-with-words has already occurred; not only are we no longer in the preparadigm stage, we can already see problems in the aging paradigm.

One of these problems results from the exclusive focus on either making your own audience or becoming what your audience demands. These apparently opposite actions are similar in fact, for both deny the dynamics of communication. To use Burke’s words again, it is the division between people that makes communication between them possible, and it is the independence of people which invites the dancing of attitudes. Certainly for Piaget, de-centering does not deny egocentricity; assimilation and accommodation are reciprocal processes defining growth. And Moffett and Britton do not promote de-centering at the expense of centering. For them the expressive function is not simply a means to the higher ends of transactional writing. Under Burke’s dramatic conception of languages such a distinction is transcended by the larger view of all language as symbolic action and by the idea of communication between separate individuals. Likewise, the theory can accommodate writing as a mode of thinking and as a way of communicating. Neither developmental theory nor composition theory needs to opt for the image of self as changing and social or static and personal;

the interactive, dynamic process between self and other which Piaget, Moffett, Britton, and Burke argue for provides a more efficient model for the teaching of writing in a Writing Center. And so, de-centering will not do as a theory to guide the relationships between writer and reader nor as a theory to guide the relationship between the Writing Center and other parts of the college and community.

Before describing what happens in a Writing Center informed by this theory of language, I want first to meet the possible objection that a Writing Center does not need a theory. While it is true that in most cases when labs are first established the faculty do not explicitly define their theory—the situation does this for them implicitly—it does not take long before students, tutors, and faculty become aware that they do have a theory, that, in fact, people do not proceed without one. We all know that blondes have more fun and that rings around the collar are shameful. We know, perhaps only implicitly, what we think writing is—penmanship, fiction, errors, whatever. The realization that we do have theories may come about when faculty realize they are instructing others about how to write when they are talking, checking boxes marked “Comma Faults,” and turning in evaluation forms consisting of numbers not words. Students quickly look askance, or knowingly, when those who profess that writing is meaningful do not write; faculty and students look at each other with embarrassment when the classroom teacher’s comments contradict what the faculty and tutors have been preaching is good writing. We have all learned that the do-what-I-say-not-what-I-do approach does not work, for actions do indeed speak louder than words. But we are also learning, with the help of Burke and others, that verbal actions can often speak even louder. What happens in a Writing Center must necessarily reflect a theory of composition when language is perceived as performance, as action.

The theory of composition which informs a Writing Center which changes and still holds is, then, not a theory of audience or de-centering, but neither is it a theory of re-centering, of returning to the fixed basics or to the written product. Instead, the theory of language as symbolic action is a broader rhetorical theory which conceives of audience as only one among many components in a writing situation. Therefore, we teach not only good writing, that which E.D. Hirsch shows is recognized by cognitive psychologists, textbook writers, and teachers alike, but also writing which is good for specific and different situations. We have found that our shift in emphasis, from the constant maxims to the contextualizing and transforming of these maxims in particular writing scenes, makes sense to students. Students all know one thing for sure: every English teacher wants something different, even though they all

talk the same line about punctuation, paragraphs, and revision. For years, students have been taught the constancies of good writing, but the Writing Center seems to be a place which can respect the fact that, despite diligence on the parts of students and teachers, many students still haven't learned what they have heard and exercised about for years. And those who have learned them in one situation often lose their footing in new writing scenes. What students know and seem determined not to forget is that writing, like talking, changes according to the situation. Good writers are those who know that all the world is a stage but that there are many different performances.

But what does it mean, practically, to have the theory of language as symbolic action as the guide for a Writing Center? What does it mean to teach to the differences in writing situations as well as to the similarities in scenes? How can we help students rely on the rhetorical skills they have learned in living and in speaking without also encouraging "you know's," "well's," and, other speech characteristics? Can students really handle the multiplicity of juggling intentions, audience, organization, syntax, word choice, and on and on? Can they focus on the whole and on the parts? Finally, how does the theory of language as symbolic action allow the Writing Center to fall apart and yet hold?

To teach writing as symbolic action means that we help students to see themselves as writers and to understand writing as a meaningful action. In general, we do this by providing them a stage, or a scene. Again, Kenneth Burke provides the image we have found most effective:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

(The Philosophy of Literary Form, 110-111)

Burke's image of the parlor stresses the social and playful aspects of language use, as well as the cooperative interaction between people. Central to the Writing Center is a roundtable discussion, where students read drafts aloud to others, respond to papers with questions, suggestions, and comments, where they discuss assignments and possible approaches

and modes of organization, and where they read and listen. New students often sit quietly at first but finally put in their oars, unable to resist taking part in the conversation at hand. When a student reads aloud a draft to others, he enacts the role of writer, and the sound of his own voice allows him to become critical and committed to the part he plays. Likewise, students who hear themselves speaking critically about another's paper are performing the complementary role to that of writer, the role of critical reader of their own writing. We have found that this scene provides an "enabling and ennobling environment," to use Janet Emig's words. Furthermore, with people communicating as the center, individualized methods, such as work with modules, computers, and audio visual aids, can be seen for what they are, the means to communication. In the give-and-take of the parlor, students realize the need for work on specific problems or strategies in order to perform more effectively where it counts—with other people.

Consistent with this basic principle of language as performance are several related principles. First is the idea that writing is rewriting, a rewriting of the self, of subject matter, of audiences, and of the language. No one ever learns how to write; people spend their lives learning, by adapting what they know to what is new. But while each writing performance is different, each builds on previous performances; once students realize that self-expression is not self-destruction they are more willing to experiment, to try and to err. They begin to realize that errors are the signs of learning. By reading aloud to others who respond, they are able to evaluate the various, usually contradictory responses and then assume authority for their own revisions. Because we believe that writing changes with the changing scenes, we encourage students to confront the differences head-on, and once again we do so by providing a situation in which the contradictions are central. The Writing Center, informed by this theory of language, invites students from all departments, from all levels of writing, and from all ages. Students who listen to papers on poetry, to lab reports, to history book reviews, and to letters of application have confirmed what they already know about language: that it changes. Within this context, they can then see the value of what remains the same.

We have found that to confine the interminable conversation about writing to the parlor of the Writing Center is impossible, for the word gets around. We also realize that there are other heated conversations in progress elsewhere which we can benefit from. We have served as adjuncts to regular courses, meeting with entire classes or with groups to work on the writing for that particular class; we have met regularly as one-fourth of a class and irregularly; and we have held the Writing

Center in the usual place and carried it elsewhere. The work with graduate assistants across the curriculum, and we offer mini-courses on taking exams, doing research, and editing. Our theory provides coherence for this variety of symbolic actions and direction for other relocations of the Writing Center throughout the University.

But conversations about writing have extended beyond the sphere of the University. We have sponsored bi-weekly series of public talks about writing by faculty in the University and public schools, by local businessmen, lawyers, and journalists, and by creative writers. An outgrowth of these public discussions was a graduate course in the teaching of writing open to students in English and Education and to public school teachers from all levels and disciplines, asked for by public school teachers from all levels in the local district. The district sponsored the attendance of nine teachers by paying for tuition, books, and release time. The teachers, in turn, offered in-service to teachers in their schools and served on a committee to do an in-depth study of writing across the curriculum in the district. The nine teachers then became part of the “Teacher Bank” of the State Department of Education which is a resource for teachers in the state. The conversation has expanded even further into the Wyoming Writing Project, which includes a state-wide Writing Day, a holistic reading of the papers, and a three-week summer Institute on Writing, funded jointly by school districts in the state, the State Department of Education, and the University. The New Jersey Writing Project has advised the project, which has also been conversant with the Huntington Beach Project and the Bay Area Writing Project. In each of these centers, the theory of language as symbolic action gives shape and coherence as people—students and teachers—begin to see themselves as writers, to understand writing as rewriting, and to recognize that writing performances always change.

These various parlor rooms have given us many “perspectives by incongruity,” to use another of Burke’s key terms, so that we can see writing and our teaching of writing more critically. The multiple viewpoints led us to realize the value of actually assessing our theory and practice through empirical research. We saw that students perform very differently in a Writing Center, to which they come voluntarily without the fear of failure or grades, than in a regular classroom. Therefore we devised three research projects to test our theories.

First, we are testing the hypothesis that writing changes according to writer, reader, purpose, and context by asking students to re-contextualize drafts and final papers. For example, a student might revise a paper in which he played the role of student writing to a teacher as evaluator about the persuasive techniques in two ads. To recontext-

tualize the paper, assume the new role of advertising manager of *Playboy* and adopt the new purpose of informing the companies that, because of the increase in more highly educated readers, they need to change their ads. The questions here are do modes, purposes, and audiences make a difference, and if so how do they? We assume that they do. We also think that students who are able to understand the motives in a writing situation—those of the writer and the reader—are able to write more convincingly. We think that the “grammar of motives” is a better starting point than the grammar of parts of speech or even of sentences, but we do not know.

Our second research project is also a testing of the basic theory in that we ask students to revise a draft after they have performed a particular writing action, such as reading a draft aloud, condensing the draft to a paragraph and each paragraph to a sentence, or talking about the content and organization. We then examine revisions in the text to see what kinds of changes occur after which activities. We believe that a rhetorical action, such as reading aloud to others, leads to broad revisions at many levels, while sentence combining, for example, results in changes at the sentence level.

A third project also tests the basic theory that writing as a skilled action requires conscious attention and tacit knowledge but that the relationships between these changes according to the situation. We began by using the protocol analysis methods, developed by Janet Emig in her early study and used more recently by Flower and Hayes, but we modified it because we found that our students said what they thought we wanted to hear—what we had said to them. Very quickly they proved their rhetorical sophistication. In order to get at the points of decision in the writing process, those conscious and not, we ask students to change to a pen of a different color whenever they become aware of themselves writing. We interview the students afterwards about the changes, and we categorize the points of change in terms of text features, semantic meaning, and rhetoric. Heated discussions about the research are interminable; action research is appropriate to our theory of language.

The theory of language as symbolic action provides a solution to the broadest problem of the Writing Center by giving coherence and continuity to the changing actions. The theory predicts that things will fall apart, and it therefore allows for the Writing Center to hold. The theory guides our practice which, in turn, refines the theory. We have found that such a theory is not only efficient, but with the way things are changing now, it is also essential. In the recent *Profession 1980*, J. Paul Hunter opens a conversation with a new tone and different attitude towards the

Writing Center:

All is not, however, sweetness and light—or enrollment and FTE—in contemplating the Joy of Composition, and any euphoria about writing clinics as eternal redemption centers needs to be grounded in some basic psychological realities and historical remembrances.

The negative tone is clear in “euphoria,” and “eternal redemption.” Before the Writing Center becomes simply a sweet memory, those of us who believe that the value of the Writing Center is its efficiency in teaching writing need to make our case convincing. We need to keep oral and written conversations vigorously in progress, and we need a theory to keep us from talking in circles.

Tilly Eggers
University of Wyoming