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## Writing Centers: A Long View

*Judith Summerfield*

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William James says that we live our lives engaged in two fundamentally distinctive activities: *flights* and *perchings*. When we are in *flight*, we are doing, making, surviving, carrying on the work we need to do to stay alive. In James Britton's terms, we are *participating* in the work of the world. We are participants.

When we *perch*, we step back and look at what we have made, how we have done our work, what in fact worked and what didn't, what we would do over again, what now makes sense, what doesn't. Our primary mental activity now is *evaluating*, making sense of, interpreting, criticizing. We are now *spectators* of our own lives, of our makings and doing.

These two activities characterize my involvement with writing centers. For nearly all of the Seventies, I was a participant: doing, making, creating a writing center, paving new ground at the college, establishing satellite programs at local "feeder" high schools—all that is involved in *doing* a writing center. For the past five years or so, I've had the opportunity to take a long perching, a long view, to think about what writing centers are all about, to be a spectator.

About five years ago, I was asked to retire from the writing center at my college. I suppose I had been too noisy, too demanding, too persistent. I kept repeating myself. Parrot-like, I kept asking *why?* And *why not?* Why isn't there more money? Why can't we hire more tutors? Why can't we set up a course for tutors? Why can't we extend hours? Why can't we pay our tutors more? Why can't we get a larger room? Why can't we paint the walls?

At that time, the paint on the walls had dramatically chipped away—the hospital green looked shabbier and shabbier, and with the prospect of increased budget cuts, our spirits reflected those drab walls. I thought a coat

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of paint might brighten us, as well as the room—a converted class-room that was bursting at the seams.

The bureaucratic machinery opposed the new paint: every turn we took, we hit a stone wall. No, we could not get the writing center painted. When we decided to paint the room ourselves, we heard that the college regulated against using anything but college paint. Finally, after two years, the walls were painted—a shocking, blinding aqua-blue—the only paint, they told us, that was available at that time. Take it or leave it, we were told. We took it.

In short, I guess, I was a nuisance. I wouldn't take *no* for an answer. At one point, I suggested that the Writing Center break from the particular administrative, bureaucratic position we were in. I had called for civil war, secession, independence. I received a polite letter, saying something about the fact that institutions benefitted from "rotation of administrators." I was to be *rotated*.

So it has been five years since I've set foot in the writing center. The message was clear—get out and stay out, and don't give the new directors any ideas. *Behave*. A time of nay-saying had set in.

It had been a time of yea-saying when the writing center had been created in 1972. The Writing Workshop (directed at the outset by Sandra Schor; I, one of her assistants, took over the directorship in 1974) had grown up and out of the great social experiment of Open Admissions at the City University of New York. In those years, we were in the hot-seat of school change. The University made a commitment to the under-classes of New York City: we would open our doors to all who wanted to attend. We would make it possible for them to pursue their own American dreams. We would open *new* doors. In those early experimental, exhilarating years, the writing center, its actual establishment, was seen as integral to these political, social, and pedagogic experiments.

It had been this social context that had induced the work of Mina Shaughnessy, Robert Lyons, Donald McQuade, Marie Ponsot, and Kenneth Bruffee. A new population of students demanded that we look at what we had been doing traditionally, habitually, in the college classroom. The spirit of innovation, of daring, of saying "*Yes—it's possible*"—was everywhere. It was a time when instructors opened the doors of their classrooms. Instructors who were faced with a new population of college student left the privacy, and the virtual isolation, of the classroom and peeked out into the halls and asked for support from their colleagues. "What can I do?" they asked each other, and the pronoun shifted to *we*—"What can *we* do?"—as a spirit of collaboration was born, it seems, almost overnight. One day we were working there alone, and the next day we were all engaged—instructor, student, administrator, tutor—in collaborative *doing*. Nothing seemed impossible.

We began to school ourselves: the maps had not yet been drawn. The territory was new. There were voices we called upon: Jerome Bruner on learning, James Moffett on the universe of discourse, William Labov on Black English, Noam Chomsky on transformational-generative grammar, but those were the days before ethnography, word-processing, collaborative learning, writing across the disciplines. I suppose that some administrators expected us to do no more than help students write correct sentences. But we weren't satisfied. We read all the grammar books we could find: transformational-generative, structural, Allen's X-word grammar, and traditional grammars. We read social histories, to try to place ourselves. We set up informal seminars for ourselves: one summer some of us decided to read James Britton's *Language and Learning* and *Writing Abilities*. We read and read, and when we had the time, we talked about what we had read.

Mostly, we *did*. We taught courses and ran tutor-training sessions and tutored students ourselves. We recognized that the tutors were key to the whole enterprise, that we were schooling a generation of teachers, some of whom are still the best teachers in our writing program. We started a weekly newsletter. We printed collections of students' writings. Of tutors' writings. We read each others' works. We put tutors in the classroom. We brought classes to the writing center. It was an extraordinary time of learning for all of us—and for many of us, even though we may not be directly related to writing centers now, the spillover still lasts, for it is in the writing center that many of us cut our teeth on a *kind* of doing that we still do. It is that which I will focus on now—what is it that we still do that is worth doing? What is it that is worth preserving? What is it that came out of these early experiments with writing centers?

The *it* can be summarized in a clause: that all teaching, tutoring, writing, reading, indeed, all languaging acts, are ineluctably social. The workshop experiment forced that upon us. Taking the long view, we might say that there have been two stages in this process:

- 1) The first was the focus on the individual, on the individual *process*.
- 2) The second is a focus on the individual in context, or to use Vygotsky's term: *The Mind in Society*.

Let me reflect on the first stage. What we began to recognize, particularly through the one-to-one encounter in tutoring was that we are all different. There are different ways of composing, of reading, of experiencing the world. Different minds, different experiences. Those of us who came to tutoring from teaching quickly realized that we could no longer construe our students as a homogeneous blob. Our perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning and language had fundamentally changed, not only in degree, but in kind. These shifts we see reflected in just about every

textbook in the field: the shift from something called *product* to *process*. The focus on revision, on collaborative-learning, on peer-editing all began to make its way into our jargon under the catch-word *process*.

At its best, researchers began to explore the ways writers compose, revise, construct meaning. We all now take for granted that writing is *recursive*, a move back and forth, a taking in of what has been generated as we consider what is to come next. We know, for example, from Sondra Perl's research that inexperienced writers stop themselves, as they go back over the words they have already written, crossing out, correcting, rewriting the surface features, and not allowing themselves to write long stretches of discourse.

At its worst, the process of *process* has become reified, so that those who have not plumbed the depths of what it means to compose, to construct meaning, make *static* a fluid act. Look to the textbooks now that offer process in *stages*: first pre-write, then draft, then revise. At its worst, process has become institutionalized—one institution I know dictates that all students in all composition courses *must* write a certain number of drafts. The writer who does, in fact, get it all down in a first/final draft is highly suspect. Revision, institutionalized in these ways, is just as suspect as any other description that turns prescriptive.

When I hear a program or a text described as taking a “process-approach,” I am immediately suspicious. And what I often find is that the emperor is not wearing any clothes, even though he claims to have a new wardrobe. My bet is that those who talk in these ways have had nothing to do with writing centers (or teaching), that they claim to understand what composing is all about, but their agenda is pre-emptive: it is an agenda. In the same way, I now see textbooks advertised as promoting a *workshop* approach—what precisely that means must be questioned. We must become skeptical, to make certain that the *workshop approach* does not become reified, institutionalized, and therefore, neutered, as *process* has become.

What is truly valuable about the experiment of writing centers/workshops has to do with the second stage, with the recognition of the social nature of language and learning. A genuine workshop is one that builds a community of writers, readers, listeners, talkers, thinkers, who are encouraged to understand how they write as individuals, but equally important, as members of a community. The process-approach lays on the individual student a method. The true workshop approach inquires into the mind working in society.

In a genuine workshop, writing is an interactive engagement between writer and reader. It is not a one-dimensional focus on what the writer does.

Rather, writing is seen in terms of what it does to a reader, or better, to *readers*. In this dynamic interaction, the words a writer writes come to life as they are received, reacted to, by a live reader(s) who reads not only out of her own personal preferences, biases, associations, memories, but also, out of what Stanley Fish calls interpretive communities. We do not write in a social vacuum. Nor do we read in a social vacuum. And the writing center, given its constraints of grades and exams and institutional requirements, allows us to make our own courses—to construct what Robert Scholes calls a “local curriculum” which grows out of the students’ needs and interests and the instructor/tutor’s awareness of those needs. In the context of schooling in the academy, the workshop offers an extraordinary freedom. The agendas can be ours. We do not need to be cut off from students at the ends of semesters. Our courses can continue. Even for years. And when it works, we find a possibility for growth, for a kind of recycling: students become tutors become teachers. I have seen it happen.

The nature of the writing center, then, is community—and that is precisely why it can become problematic. Institutions don’t necessarily *like* little communities within their walls, for there is power in numbers. As students come together, they can ask *why* and *why not*? “Why is my reading of this poem *wrong*?” Why is this phrase *awkward*? What does this grade mean? Why can I revise in this class and not in that one? Why did instructor X give this paper an A and instructor Y give the same paper a C–? How can you write a journal if it’s graded? Who am I writing for? How can writing be “free”? Tutors and students question together. They often conclude that teachers in classrooms take particular stands in order to keep control, in order to manage behavior. These conversations challenge the “nature” of authority and expose underlying values, politics, ideology, and epistemology.

For we are talking about nothing less than this—about ways of knowing the world, about ways the dominant culture works (in the schools), about domination and subjugation, in the complex arena of writing and reading texts. If I, teacher Z, say that this is what *this* text means, then who are you to disagree with me? And if you persist, just remember that it is I who give the grade. (I grow uneasy with the loose usage of the word *power*: if we, as teachers, set assignments, evaluate texts, and *give grades*, then we are the primary holders of power; to deny so is to deny the fundamental “nature” of schooling in the culture.)

As I look back now, from my long perching, I revise the evaluations that I began with when I started this text. For some time, when I stopped to think about my ousting from the writing center, I construed it personally. I had annoyed the authorities. I had asked too many questions, demanded too much. I had been made to feel that I hadn’t *behaved* properly. But this is a personal reading. There’s more I see now, with my advantage of

spectatorship, my advantage of time. I can talk about this personal story within a public context, a history.

The history has to do with what happened to CUNY and its budget crises of the mid- to late-Seventies, with the fact that yea-saying had turned, overnight, into nay-saying. It was money—economics—that changed the environment from positive to negative. But it is not just CUNY that we must talk about; we must take a hard look at what happened to the experiments of the Sixties, with the fact that the doors that had been opened now began to close. You could see it happening. Open Admissions faded into the woodwork. The impetus to interact with colleagues turned sour as jobs were cut. The Sixties had brought Directors of Writing Programs together to form CAWS (the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors) and had led to WPA (Writing Program Administrators)—these are the direct outgrowths of those times. But the energies that had been poured into collaboration now began to shift. The history of this experiment has not yet been written: perhaps we're still too close. And some of us have not yet given up some of the battle.

But it's clear to me that energies are now being directed to two areas: testing and computers. If you look at each—testing and computers—if you read these “new” movements politically, you'll see that each calls for the individual to confront his situation alone. One, the individual student facing a test that will determine whether or not she will be allowed to earn a college degree. Each man for himself because that is the nature of the beast. No collaborative activity is admitted when one is *taking a test*. That is the ineluctable fact.

In the same way, while the computer/word-processor may make writing and revision easier, it CAN threaten the community of the writing center. I know that much of the time now spent in the writing center at my school is spent on tutoring students to pass the CUNY Writing Assessment Test: that is the first order of business. I know, as well, that we are fortunate in having a director who is using computers in ways that do not threaten the collaborative community of the writing center. But I know, too, that the temptation must be great to call up a software program and call that tutoring.

I wasn't fighting for blue walls, for new paint, for more money: I was fighting for a *context*. The more I explored it, the richer it became, and the possibilities for an epidemic, an explosion of this kind of learning and languaging, made me dizzy. And the corresponding movements in other fields—of reader-response theories, of semiotics, cultural anthropology, sociolinguistics, of ethnography itself—all seemed to point in a direction that was, indeed, revolutionary. Shirley Brice Heath talks about the same kind of spirit in her seminal work, *Ways With Words*, in which she describes

the community spirit and activity that sparked a small Southern town in the late Sixties, early Seventies, where school officials, teachers, parents, businessmen, children, clergymen, were working together on the *possibilities* of integration. Her epilogue, however, tells us that the participants mostly gave up or were pushed out, as money dried up, as government grants ended, as disillusionment set in, as the realization became clear—that the system would need to be dynamited in order for it to change. She had spent ten years there. Now she is a spectator of that past, just as we all are when we look back on the past and try to make sense of it.

Now that I come to the end of this text, I see the past a little more clearly—for the moment. The *no* I kept hearing had to do with the times, with going back, with pulling back, with the Nixons of the time saying: watch out for those who assemble. There is power in numbers. *We* must divide to conquer. *We* must send those noisy schoolteachers back into the recesses of their classrooms and insist that they keep their doors shut. Danger lurks when teachers gather in the halls or when they engage in talk, in something new that seems to be cropping up all over the place—something called a *writing center*. *Decentralize*.

I have visited some writing centers of late. Some astonish me. They are plush, with luxurious carpets, modern (or post-modern) prints on the walls, secretaries, computer terminals, stocked libraries, spacious surroundings—and *cubicles*. I say watch out for cubicles. Watch out for computer terminals. Watch out for all evidence of attempts to break down the gathering of minds.

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**Judith Summerfield** began teaching in an inner-city high school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1972 she took a position in the new Writing Skills Workshop at Queens College (CUNY). At present she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literature and composition and continues to take an active interest in the problems of basic writers. She is co-author of the *Random House Guide to Writing, Frames of Mind, Texts and Contexts* (winner of the 1987 Mina Shaughnessy Award), *Responding to Prose*. Her first novel, *The Women of the Town*, was completed in 1987.