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Play and Game: Implications For the Writing Center

Daniel T. Lochman

At the end of the last academic year, I came upon an unexpected dilemma. Among my regular duties as director of our department's writing center was the unenviable task of preparing an annual summary of its activities and a review of its performance. My dilemma arose shortly after I had gathered the relevant materials. It was then that I observed what one well-meaning student had written—openly and shamelessly—on the lab's evaluation form. Not only had he praised the assistance he had received during his visits to the center, but, he went on, he had had “fun” doing so. Of course, all who are familiar with student evaluations know the double-edged threats they represent. That the student had found his sessions enjoyable was, naturally, a positive thing. But—I wondered—would the archetypal, cold blooded administrator who haunts my imagination find similar gratification in this innocent admission of fun? Worse, would a very serious-minded bureaucracy take offense that a freshman enrolled in an introductory writing course could be having *fun* when—as the figure in my imagination took on an increasingly arch and fiendish aspect—all students should be *working hard* in writing courses?

This excessive vision reveals, of course, something about my baroque imagination, as well as something about the paranoia common to many program directors, including directors of writing centers. Yet this experience also suggests how sharp is the line that I—and, I believe, many faculty and administrators—draw between what is intellectually rigorous, sober, therefore worthy of concern, and what is playful and hence outside the scope of serious educational endeavors. Too often, I believe, we who are most closely involved with university instruction—even we who are

involved with the one-to-one instruction available at writing centers—are unwilling to admit that there is value in a reciprocal interaction of work and play. Here, I will discuss some pedagogic and academic attitudes associated with play and observe the historical development of the writing center as a place for spontaneity and playfulness within the university.

Since the days of the first writing centers, directors have worked diligently to transform their facilities from back-room band-aids to integral components of the university and its institutions. In so doing, they have claimed for the center a unique mode of learning, one which thrives outside the framework of the classroom and its hierarchical, teacher-centered structure. Yet, when writing centers emerged from their too-often-literal closets and gained a degree of tolerance, acceptance, and even approval from faculty and administrators, their formerly chaotic character, which one might euphemistically call “spontaneity,” began to change, as they moved ever closer to the highly structured modes of instruction which they had claimed to supersede. Given their academic origins, it is not surprising that centers soon developed procedures and goals according to the standards established by well-published directors, such as Joyce Steward, Muriel Harris, and Stephen North. Expectations and methods became increasingly standard and norm-creating, in part as a result of the development of conferences, journals, and newsletters devoted solely to the writing center. Through these new means of specialized, professional discourse, there appeared a new panoply of *topoi* concerning the creation and perpetuation of the writing center as an institution; in this way, we have become accustomed to hear of the *theoria* and *praxis* of tutor-training, instructional techniques and materials, public relations, and methods of evaluation and research.

In striving to sustain and develop their writing centers, directors have often introduced trappings appropriate to serious business. As a consequence, some influential centers now offer credit for tutorial instruction or for the study and practice of tutoring, and many have developed workshops, internships, tutorials, outreach programs, and public relations strategies. Most new programs cultivate the image of the writing center as a serious place where one can expect that students will perform serious work. However, as Stephen North has complained in a recent issue of *College English*, the fundamental “idea” of the writing center—that of a facility appropriate for one-to-one instruction, addressed especially to the improvement of writing—is in danger of being overwhelmed by directors’ seemingly natural desire to justify, preserve, and expand their centers—to provide them, in short, with an institutional character (437). In this way, a director who follows what seems to be a reasonable inclination to expand the writing center may unexpectedly inhibit the flexibility and innovation which, ironically, were the hallmarks of nearly all early and many current writing

centers. In this, as in so many other human endeavors, we encounter the paradox that playful, exploratory discovery depends for its survival upon rigid, institutional constraints.

The connection of this paradox to the writing center became clear to me last year, when I prepared Theodore Roszak's essay, "Forbidden Games," for a composition class. The essay, reprinted in the sixth edition of *The Norton Reader*, presents as its chief concern the dangers implicit in the modern technocratic era of unbridled competition (819-30). The interesting social implications of Roszak's argument are not my concern here, but his contrasts between the concepts of *play* and *game* are, since these provide a general illustrative frame by which to differentiate the pedagogical activities of the writing center and classroom.

Rozsak defines play as activity which is performed freely, randomly, with little or no explicit, conscious, or constructive purpose. Play occurs, Rozsak claims, as a consequence of an infantile desire for sensory pleasure, whose fulfillment in "simple and immediate joyousness" is gradually suppressed and abandoned as the child grows to adulthood (824-25). Because play is associated with the "fun" of "very fleshly satisfaction," it represents a danger to the adult, who has restricted sensual indulgence to specific, ritualized activities. Therefore, for the adult, the pleasurable disorder of infantile play is usually replaced by the orderly and rigid structure implied by the "game." Though Rozsak associates the game *with* play, he specifies that the game, because of its rational "regularity and orderliness," must be a specialized form of play, distant from the chaotic, sensual, and "natural" play of the infant.

To describe play, Rozsak uses "generalized" and "lawless" in contrast to the specific structure, "arbitrary rules," and "arbitrary—usually competitive—goals" of the game. He calls play primitive and spontaneous:

[Play] reaches out toward experience without purpose and without discipline. It moves impractically with the stream of experience, rather than immobilizing and dividing that stream. It gives no power. It manipulates whatever it happens upon not for the sake of controlling, but for the sake of enjoying. Although we have a need to play, play has no survival value. Playfulness is, I suggest, what the game-making power of intelligence must discipline. (828)

As the previous sentence implies, Rozsak associates games with the evolution of intelligence and the development of human culture. Although he claims that even animals exhibit behaviors which are sufficiently random to constitute play, he attributes to mankind alone the ability to impose order, regularity, arbitrary conventions, complex rules, and goals which characterize games.

For Rozsak, therefore, games are a product of intelligence, which imposes order upon play and directs it to some ostensibly serviceable end.

Without games and without the human intelligence which makes them meaningful, culture would be impossible. At all stages of human existence after the infantile, games give shape and meaning to play. The child who wishes to construct a tower must stack his blocks according to some set of rules, thereby exercising a degree of discipline sufficient for the simple game's completion. In its pursuit and acquisition of a goal, even a simple game becomes linked to human behavior and the desire for social and personal rewards.

Alternatively, unrestrained play—for example, the destruction of the block tower—diminishes the healthy influence of competition, the individual's drive for success, control, and dominance. Yet the rule-violating nature of play—manifest in the push which knocks over the stack of blocks—allows for free expression of the self, without consideration of an inhibiting social “audience,” together with its interests or demands. It is precisely this liberating influence of play which, I believe, must be tapped if a learner is to generate significant associations, imaginative insight, bold expression, and valuable ideas—all susceptible to the shaping, clarifying norms supplied by the game. Together, play and game offer potential for the acquisition and communication of knowledge, since the undisciplined materials generated during play may be presented to an audience through the conventional, normative modes of expression appropriate to the game.

Writing in 1966, Roszak developed his basic contrast by drawing upon sources ranging from Johan Huizinga's classic *homo ludens* to Piaget's theory of the development of play and cognition and other biologically, philosophically, and psychologically based epistemologies. In the nearly twenty years since the writing of Roszak's essay, theories of play have continued to influence many disciplines, especially cognitive and developmental psychology, educational theory and practice, and most fields concerned with the creation or analysis of cultural artifacts (content note 1). The influence of theories of play are found in college curricula—even in business courses which link opportunities for play to improved performance—as well as among theoretical movements, such as deconstructionism and rhetorical literary criticism. For example, Richard Lanham's contrast between “serious” and “rhetorical” modes of expression is analogous in some respects to Roszak's “game” and “play,” except that the rhetorical mode presupposes a social purposiveness which is absent in egocentric play (1-35).

It is not surprising, therefore, that theories of play have influenced the theory and practice of rhetoric and composition, leading to the advocacy of free and expressive forms of writing which characterize the arguments of Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, and more recently Donald Murray. Indeed, it is in the context of such theories that the first influential writing labs appeared.

Little attention has been paid to the lab as a facility which can unite “play” to the “game” of academic writing. Though many studies mention “play” in connection with writing centers *in passim* and Thomas Nash argues in a recent article that the writing center is a “playground” for the development of ideas (182-96), the notion of the center as a setting for rehearsal, for the generation of ideas, words, sentences, paragraphs—all the units of discourse—and as the median between the student’s self and an audience remains largely unexplored.

Yet the connection between the writing center and Roszak’s concepts of play and game is an obvious one. Over and over, those who work in writing centers witness similar processes and problems. Some students enter with little sense of their voice or audience; they come to the center to learn how to interact with others in writing (Hawkins 64-65). Usually, such students must come to see that writing is susceptible to play—that the agony of comma splices and fragments may be compensated by the delight of words, the creation and destruction and recreation of sentences—that writing is free and impermanent, at least until the final draft is submitted to its audience.

Others arrive all too aware of the gamesmanship of writing—of the rules which govern everything from word selection to syntax, the numbers of sentences in paragraphs, and even the number of paragraphs appropriate for the development of tripartite theses. These students, who have learned to write within the competitive atmosphere of the classroom, may discover that the act of communication requires more than the fulfillment of rules—that it requires a personal commitment, a voice, a style, a sense of power and authority often lost amid the academic, classroom preoccupation to learn rules, to “psych out” the teacher, and to find magical formulae for success.

Still others arrive with little sense of audience; they produce for public display their private jokes, their generalities, selves without a sense of restraint—lacking what an earlier age called “decorum.” In writing centers, this latter group learns the need for rules, for constraints upon playful chaos. For all such students, the writing center can act as a bridge between play and game, acquiring a significance which extends beyond that of a mere service. Not only does the center *supplement* work in the classroom—it surpasses it, by lending personal exploration and commitment to those exercises and tasks which, to students, often seem like so many short games nested within the longer, general “game” implicit in following—or beating—the apparently arbitrary rules which lead to an apparently arbitrary final goal—the degree.

In contrast to the playfulness implicit in the non-graded work of the writing center is the structure inherent in the writing course. Assignments

customarily designed for the classroom neatly conform to Roszak's definition of the game. Instructors ask students—the players—to complete written assignments according to explicit or implicit rules, which, at least from the point of view of the students, often seem arbitrary. The goal of the course—usually inseparable for students from the grade—seems equally arbitrary, especially when the grade seems, as it too often does from the student's point of view, disjunct from any skills developed during the course. The game-like competition makes it natural to try to “psych out” instructors—or to outsmart them through plagiarism or other means—since doing so offers the easiest means of deciphering the rules which allow success.

From the teacher's point of view, of course, the student's view misses the point entirely. The instructor insists that skills—not mere rules—are the subject of the course and the basis of improvement, that such skills may be acquired by imagining that an *actual* situation—the classroom—can be replaced by a supposedly more *realistic* one—the readership which exists somewhere beyond the necessarily artificial audience of teacher and students. Despite this necessary pretense, students are generally expected to treat the whole affair seriously—which they usually do—and as a matter of academic survival and self-respect—which it often is.

In the one-to-one discussion that occurs at most writing centers, students have an immediate, easily accessible audience, one prepared to respond without external rewards such as grades but with genuine, human responses to students' attempts at communication. At their best, writing centers allow students, especially basic writers, the opportunity to *play* with language—often for the first time in an educational setting. When students are able to replace their game-playing mentality with genuine play with words and their arrangement in rhetorical structures, they can discover an authentic purpose for their writing.

This is not to say that the writing center should throw out the programmed exercises, the workbooks, or the CAI programs. Obviously, play with language must be restrained by rules and conventions if it is to communicate to others. The development of all culture, as Roszak suggests, depends upon the reflective and rule-making procedures of the game. It is only when the game becomes an obsession, when the exercises and forms of writing according to rule become the center of a student's attention, that the dangers of the game become manifest. If an excessive preoccupation with gamesmanship results in destructive competition, in the potential for moral or social violence—if it results in a preoccupation with the formal aspects of writing and with grades—the game must be restrained by a renewed awareness of the value of play.

In an academic context, the writing center offers the ideal site and optimal methods for students to learn the values of writing as play. The writing center is a neutral area, where instructors' judgments can and must be abated and where the opportunities for playful change and flexibility are most plentiful. At the writing center, the student who has difficulty with paragraph structure can re-write paragraphs as often as needed, without fear of a dreadful *terminus* beyond which lurks additional failure.

Finally, the steely-eyed, rigid administrator who inhabits my—and I believe other writing center directors'—imagination, may be answered in this way: the “fun” claimed on the evaluation form constitutes a *moral* as well as an *academic* victory, since the student not only has learned a more appropriate mode of communicating with an audience—from personal commitment rather than empty formality—but also has improved his sense of the relationship between himself and others. By discovering that writing can be playful, he has found what interests him, and he can learn that what interests him may be communicated all the more effectively to others. Such knowledge goes beyond the humbler *skills* we sometimes attribute to learning, but it is at the heart, I believe, of a university education.

Notes

¹Modern literature concerned with play is extensive; only a summary of key works can be cited here. Seminal, of course, are the works of Sigmund Freud; Norman Brown's *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middleton: Wesleyan UP, 1959), esp. pp. 68-73; Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1963), pp. 189-246, and *Toys and Reasons: Stages in the Realization of Experience* (New York: Norton, 1977); Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (New York: Roy, 1950); Jean Piaget's *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*, trans. C. Gattegno and F. M. Hodgson (New York: Norton, 1951), esp. pp. 5-104; Piaget and Baerbel Inhelder's *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

Janet Emig's theories concerning the value of writing as a mode of learning are based in part upon the pioneering work of Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*, trans. E. Hanfmann and G. Vakar (Cambridge: M.I.T., 1962). In contrast to Piaget, Vygotsky argues for an association between playful (in Roszak's sense), egocentric speech and the act of thinking itself, unlike Piaget's limited connection of play to symbolic thought only. According to Vygotsky, “egocentric speech does not long remain a mere accompaniment to the child's activity. Besides being a means of expression and a release of tension, it soon becomes an instrument of thought in the proper sense—in seeking and planning the solution of a problem.” Vygotsky's theory also attributes to written language a role in the development of thought—a theory which is supported by a study of Senegalese Wolof, who showed a correspondence in the complexity of generalization and the ability to write (see Patricia M. Greenfield, Lee C. Reich, and Rose R. Olver, “On Culture and Equivalence: II” in *Studies in Cognitive Growth: A Collaboration at the Center for Cognitive Studies*, ed.

Jerome S. Bruner; cf. also Vygotsky, "Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child" in *Play—Its Role in Development and Evolution*, ed. Jerome S. Bruner, Alison Jolly, and Kathy Sylva, pp. 537-554; Piaget, *Psychology of the Child*, p. 121, n. 24; Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, esp. pp. 100-102).

The dramatic sense of play and its relationship to language and society has, of course, been explored by Kenneth Burke (see esp. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 2nd ed.). Burke's theory has been related to recent theories of play by Brian Sutton-Smith in *Dialektik Des Spiel* (see also his summary to the conference recorded in *Play and Learning*, ed. Sutton-Smith, pp. 295-322).

Theoretical connections between play and language are now common as a consequence of the influence of books by James Britton and studies such as that by Julia S. Falk, "Language Acquisition and the Teaching and Learning of Writing" [*College English* 41 (1979), 436-47].

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