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An Interview with the Founding Editors of *The Writing Center Journal*

By *Jeanette Harris and Joyce Kinkead*

On the occasion of WCJ's tenth anniversary, we thought that readers of the journal might enjoy a retrospective look at the history of the journal—how it began and what has happened to it, and to the profession, in the past ten years. Therefore, we invited the original editors of the journal, Lil Brannon and Stephen North, to meet with us at the 1990 CCC Conference in Chicago for an interview. An edited transcription of that interview is presented below.

Harris. Why don't we begin with your telling us how or why you decided to start *The Writing Center Journal* ten years ago. Whose idea was it? Did it come out of a conversation that you had?

North. Well, we were at 4Cs in Washington, D.C., and I had done my dissertation on writing centers. I travelled around to about 30 or 40 different writing centers. Along the way some people said, "You know, we really should have a journal in this field. Start one, why don't you?"

Brannon. There were almost no avenues for extended pieces on the writing center. We had the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, which had been going for a few years. But CCC and *College English* at that time hadn't published anything on writing centers. And it didn't look like they were going to. And we all felt like there were more extensive pieces that really wouldn't fit in a newsletter format.

North. Well, at the end of whatever CCCC session it was, I went up and said to Lil, "Well, do you want to start a journal?"

Harris. So you were responding to a need that you had discovered was out there rather than just coming up with the idea and saying maybe some people would like to have it? People had actually indicated to you that there was a need for it?

North. Oh, definitely.

Brannon. And we didn't know each other. We just sat down that day and talked about it. We tried to figure out what we would need to do to get the journal funded, how much of our own time we could invest in it. I guess we had a cup of coffee. I remember us sitting down and hashing it out, and then we said, "Well, what we need is to go back to our institutions and see if there is any support." That was our first step.

North. It was just one of those few conference conversations where both people actually go back and do what they say. We both asked for money; we both got money.

Harris. Well, how did you go about getting that first issue together? Did you put out a call for papers or did you call on people that you knew?

North. I think for the inaugural issue we called—I remember I called Lou Kelly.

Brannon. I remember we had Judy Fishman Summerfield's paper from the conference, the address that she had given.

North. I talked to Mickey Harris. I don't know if she wrote one for that issue or another one. But we also announced it in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*.

Harris. And to whom did you send that first issue? Did you have a subscription list at that time, or did you send it out or give it away?

North. I think we probably used the mailing list from the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, and wasn't someone compiling a list of writing centers at the time? We weren't real worried about making any money. At all.

Harris. Your institutions supported you mainly?

Brannon. They supported the production, the cost of producing the journal, not our time.

North. And the mailing, which was a bigger cost. At the beginning I just sort of . . . , we had a mainframe that would do typesetting, so I just typed the stuff in or got someone else to type it in.

Harris. So it was always a computer-produced journal?

North. Yeah. Except for the layout parts. It was still paste-up when I started, so I spent a few Sunday afternoons in the writing center doing what I'm not good at, taping pages together.

Harris. What changes have you seen in writing centers since those early years? Do you see it as very much the same profession as it was when you began the journal, or do you think there have been significant changes?

North. Well, in some ways the journal itself reflects some of the major professional changes. It is a much nicer, fuller document, and it looks better, it reads better, more people from a wider range of places contribute to it.

Are there more writing centers now? I mean, my sense is that there are, but I'm not certain.

Brannon. There are many more writing centers. My sense, too, is that they're not merely "labs." They've become "centers." When we first began the journal, most writing labs were workbook-driven or auto-tutorial. Now we see people much more interested in issues of composing, and tutor training is much more an issue. It used to be one person with a tape recorder and a couple of Educulture tapes.

I also see writing centers having become central to writing-across-the-curriculum programs in many institutions where the writing center director is the key person if not the whole organizer of that enterprise.

Harris. Now, I can remember when almost everyone in writing centers knew everyone else. We were such a small group, and I'm always amazed when I come to these conferences that there are panels on writing centers with people I've never heard of. It's just become so diverse.

Kinkead. When we started this, you said that the journal filled a need; that's why you started it. But when Bob Connors reviewed the journal in a review of composition studies, he said that it was a journal before its time, and that's why you were having trouble getting manuscripts. How did you react to Connor's review?

North. I'd say he was partly right. I mean there still was a need for longer manuscripts but that didn't . . . , I mean not for longer manuscripts, for people who could, who had time and space to write seriously about what writing centers did. Like most markets, it seems, you can't just tap at the wind. People aren't keeping manuscripts at home waiting for a journal to appear. Come on, Bob, wake up.

Kinkead. Once there was a journal, people started thinking about doing that.

Brannon. And before that, everybody just said, "OK, nobody's interested, and so we just aren't going to do anything." I mean it was a slow start, but not because there were no intellectual lives of people in writing centers. There were a lot.

Harris. Do you think that the research that's being done in writing centers is still mainly practitioner-type research, to use your own [North's] term?

North. I would assume so. Only, I've been looking back through the issues of the journal, and, to a certain extent, we didn't read enough manuscripts like that, and along the way we didn't encourage enough manuscripts like that from people.

Harris. From practitioners?

North. Yeah, on account of what I do. You know, I've certainly written some, but there's a sense in which people say, well, that's for the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. In the journal I'd better have some charts or tables or something. Is it because it's a journal? I don't know.

Brannon. I think we need a way of thinking about the local knowledge that we construct through the conversations we have at our staff meetings, through the local documents that we create in writing centers, and how we think about teaching, which seems to be locally contingent and anecdotal, but very powerful in terms of the center that I work in. The question then becomes how do we take that and represent it in such a way that it can be useful to other centers. And so it might be through things like story telling or modes other than the analytic/academic essay.

Kinkead. So you want stories of writing centers to be more credible?

Brannon. Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. See, because I think that we learn more through them, we learn—see teaching is so different than theory—I mean, we're not saying that theory is not important. But there's an inexact relationship between our theoretical constructs and action in the world, and so the story allows for the conflicts to be represented and examined, whereas theory tries to get rid of all of the messy lived experience.

Harris. Would you like to see more ethnographic research done in the writing center?

Brannon. Well, see, ethnography still works from . . . , I mean it uses the concept of story. In one sense, I think, yes, absolutely because it uses the concept of story to get at the social structures and the political structures of institutional life. I'm opposed, however, to ethnography as it has been taken over by some of the researchers in our field, where one does ethnographies in order to find variables that can be later tested. That's a whole different model of ethnography.

Harris. You just mean stories? The telling of stories.

Brannon. Right.

Harris. Which are always, of course, interpretations

Brannon. So are experimental data, so is anything

Kinkead. So are you drawing on Bruner's work of narrative constructing our lives?

Brannon. Yes. Also, many feminist writers are talking about stories.

Kinkead. How do you see current literary theory perhaps informing the practices of writing centers?

Brannon. Steve just finished a paper. Do you want to get started and I'll jump in?

North. On what? Leftist language? From my point of view, one of the difficulties of contemporary literary theory—critical theory wouldn't be called literary theory necessarily—is that it wants to remove—it's opposed in all its forms to foundationalism. It's an interesting intellectual exercise to do that. The difficulty in writing centers is you don't deal with essentialist forces; you sort of end up talking to Fred, who's got history 124. There was a panel related to this yesterday that both Lil and I were at. The basis of a tutorial for me has always been a commitment to a person. I don't know if that's an essentialist commitment, and I don't know if literary theory speaks to it. Literary theory tends not to discuss loyalty or commitment in those terms. In that sense I would be inclined to say that life in the writing center can be—you can challenge it, you can challenge that kind of teaching by using contemporary literary theory, but I'm inclined to say that I sort of fight back, push back the possible chaos and division of people of let's say deconstruction. You might say, that's all very well, but I've got to live and this is what I do.

Brannon. I found thinking about literary theory or critical theory interesting as ways of offering new questions, as a way of keeping the tutorial, the life of the writing center, and our conversations from becoming so repetitive. So, for example, this year we've been discussing the feminist and Marxist debates about language and discourse because in some ways many of our tutors believe we're trying to enact a feminist pedagogy, where the model is maternal rather than paternal, that our role is to listen, to nurture, to have a place for ideas that are not ready for public scrutiny but potentially can be—that a student can have a place to explore and to develop. All those seem to fit in more with the books that are in support of women and teaching, things like *Women's Ways of Knowing* and their notions of connected teaching, for example. So we've been thinking about that book and placing it with feminist arguments that are well known in literary studies and then putting that against the Marxist argument, the counterpoint to the feminist, to say that if we are nurturing a student's voice, getting them to explore their own experiences, etc., etc., what does that mean when, for the most part, the women in the writing center are silent within the educational establishment; their experiences don't matter. There's no child care, there's no talk of family or home, there's no sense that any of these things should matter. In higher education, it seems that human relationships shouldn't matter anyway, except as they pertain to work. So are we in some way perpetuating the dominant culture by what we think we are doing and subverting what it is we're actually trying to do? So we use sometimes the Marxist economic critiques of institutions to raise questions about our set of practices, and to keep us off-center a little bit as we think we find our ground; then we want to make it shift, so we shift it the other way. So we've been using a lot of readings in those areas to enrich our teaching.

Harris. What you said suggests that you still perceive writing centers in a very powerless, subordinate position. I've noticed that this attitude is the pervasive one, that most writing center people still speak of themselves as underdogs, always struggling. And yet the reality to me seems to have changed. Do you think it has, or do you still see writing centers as the underdog?

North. We talked about this a lot. We think that we are in a pretty good position as writing centers go. But the kind of conversation that Lil describes that goes on in the writing center goes on all the time, all along. When we try to extend that conversation outside of that circle, say to talk about writing across the curriculum, then suddenly we're a far more threatening entity than we were when it was a place where students went.

Brannon. To get their commas fixed.

North. Yes. And we hadn't been aggressive; we had been pushed to go talk to those faculty. The administration thinks that's what it wants. But the writing center has to stay on the margins, in a sense, in order to be effective. Otherwise, if it adopts the model of the university as a whole, it will disappear. So in that sense, I don't know if I entirely agree, but certainly we are still . . . , if this is the mainstream, we are not dead in the middle of it unless we're a big rock or something. There's a tense relationship; there is always tension. And it has to be resolved over and over again in different ways.

Harris. Between the writing center and the department or the institution or even the other writing programs?

North. The institution and the department—I mean the writing center and the department, the writing center and the institution as a whole.

Harris. But not the other writing programs? I think that some people perceive a hierarchy in which the writing program is viewed as on a higher rung than the writing center. But I think it has helped that so many writing center positions are now tenure track positions and that many directors now are tenured. The reality, it seems to me, is that we're less the underdog than we used to be.

North. Oh, definitely! You can tell that by the spaces that writing centers get—we started out in windowless basement rooms.

Brannon. But I think we can't get complacent. In my institution, which is very progressive, probably one of the models for diversity and minority leadership, out of the 700 full-time tenure-track faculty, around 130 are full professors, 9 of those women. Women are in the lower levels. I would say that, going to writing center meetings as I have, the majority of people who are directing writing centers now are women. And so, given the institutional hierarchy, they're still not in positions where their voices are as clearly heard as the male

counterpart. Further, we need to look at the make-up of English departments. At one point when I was at NYU, there were 37 men and 2 women full-time on the faculty. So, there the department replicated the basic structure of the university. Our English department [at SUNY Albany] has more women in it, but still it's predominantly male. And so even though we have in some ways more power, we still have a lot more work to do in terms of writing centers and the people (mainly women) who work in them. I think it's too easy for men to blame women for the illiteracy of America. And that's what they're doing when they blame the writing center and the writing programs and the high school English teachers and the elementary school teachers—80% of whom are women—saying students just don't know how to write.

Kinkead. On the other hand, it looks like we're seeing that there's a real diverse group of writing centers. Have writing centers in some senses become too successful at being welcomed into the institutions? Are there some dangers there?

North. I'd say that the center of the debate for me, and to a certain extent I speak for Lil, is the issue of whether . . . , I've always been a little pragmatic from the beginning, and I always considered the role of the writing center was to help the kid be a better writer, but in the context of writing papers the way institutions want them written. Now—always—there's been a tension about that. I haven't always approved in a general sense or in a local sense or in a specific teacher sense that this was really a good idea, but I always thought that the kid . . . , that it's not up to us in this case. I still train the tutors to think that way, but I also, because of the kind of conversations we have, raise the issue of suppose we decided that the structure was really stupid and should be changed—then what do we do? To a certain extent we address that, all three of us [at SUNY-Albany], and we sort of poke away at it, a feeling of powerlessness or helplessness. You can talk to one person at a time. But that remains a central issue for us. I'd say that our program as a whole tends to want to keep the tension, but I don't know if that's true for everybody else. I'm not sure it's even finally. . . , you know it's an ethical issue of a kind, and I'm not sure who's going to be right. Maybe it would be better to have a big writing center, and everybody who went there then went and wrote papers for courses that we knew about, and we all agreed that this kind of writing is OK; this is what we'll learn to do. If you don't like it, too bad; this is what you're going to learn. You know, it's Sheridan Baker through the writing center. We won't do that, but I can see how somebody could. They could argue that they were doing a lot of good by doing this so their retention rates go up or something.

Brannon. Yes, our writing center has always worked with that tension between the wanting to socialize students into the academy and then also to resist discourse-limiting practices. We want students to liberate their imaginations, and that can happen with the student struggling against conventions and within conventions. We've spoken of that.

North. Every day.

Brannon. That's a good topic of conversation.

Harris. What do you see as the future for writing centers?

North. Well, the technology's going to change, already has a lot. Lil's got, I don't know, 7 or 8 PCs in there now, and we have a proposal to get a Daedalus-based writing classroom, which would be, according to the proposal, attached directly to the writing center.

Brannon. We do tutorials now on line. Ten years ago I wouldn't have thought of that.

North. And then the word processing has so changed writing, the conceptions of writing for kids, especially revising, that tutorials have changed. I think the nature of them is changing faster than I . . . , I mean I know how it changes writing for me, so I assume that slowly it will change the nature of tutorials. It takes a lot of friction out of discussions. But what Lil said about writing across the curriculum, I think they [writing centers] will continue to seize power in the institution by following that route.

Brannon. In fact, I really see that as some of the most interesting work ahead of us—working with the faculty in various disciplines and helping them to understand the way we've begun to think about discourse practices within English studies, beginning those same kinds of conversations within their own fields. And at Albany we've just begun that, and it's quite fascinating because it opens up all the questions of teaching that we've come to feel are settled.

North. It transcends the writing centers. When you start to do that, the conversation immediately transcends somebody's narrow conception of the issue of what writing is to the whole issue of what education is and even what American life is like.

Harris. What we want our students to know

North. Yeah. It gets real big, real fast in some respects, which is both exciting and frightening. There are times when you wish you could just close that can of worms back up and say sorry I asked.

Harris. Given the changes that have occurred and are likely to occur, what would you like to see happen to the journal—after all, it was your “child” initially. Do you still have any feeling that you'd like to somehow steer the direction?

Kinthead. The new editors that are going to come up, what advice would you give them?

North. Don't do typesetting yourself.

Brannon. Be prepared to pay expensive long distance telephone bills.

North. I'd tell them to take a lot of chances. There are ways in which I can be conservative out of habit. And that, if they could print, things they wouldn't have thought to write themselves, and if people don't like it, that's OK. Don't print it again, or print it again because you like the way they didn't like it. Invite manuscripts from people who—we have a class in composition theory—and one guy in class said—he teaches at a community college—"I got a lot of young women in my class who never speak up. What can I do to make them speak up?" "Call on them!" So I would say to new editors, "Call on some people." It doesn't have to be Lou Kelly and Mickey Harris. This is the way it's always done. You call on people who everybody knows. We'll call some people nobody knows. Get them to write something. If they don't feel confident about what they write, help them revise it.

Harris. Yes, you do a lot of that [as editor].

North. Yeah.

Harris. How did you reach the decision to turn the journal over to new editors? How did you know it was time? How did you feel about that? Were you reluctant at all?

Brannon. We weren't reluctant at all.

Kinkead. We know that feeling.

Brannon. It was a tremendous amount of work. And I think we really felt like we . . . , I can't remember the day, but I remember the conversation. We really felt like we had made our contribution; we had gotten it started, there was a good readership, and it just needed new energy and new ideas.

Harris. That's the way we feel now. We've done what we were going to do.

North. I remember I knew we were right as soon as I saw the next issue. Because I remember going through it It took me so long to get this guy to help me design the cover, and I never did like the cover very much. And that first issue you guys did—*that's* the cover I wanted. It's so easy; all you have to do is send it out west and

Kinkead. I was curious about your statement that the next editor should take risks because I think one of our agenda items was to make the journal very conservative so that it would be accepted in academic disciplines.

North. Yes.

Harris. And I think at that time it was a good impulse. I think that during the first decade a journal has to establish its credibility, not only within the profession of writing center people but in the larger profession in which we exist.

There is that larger context on which we depend. And I think the journal has earned that kind of legitimacy. But when we were thinking in terms of our replacements, one of the things we wanted was someone who could now take it [the journal] in some new directions. We think it is on good enough footing at this point so that we can take some risks.

North. Go for it. Be a little arrogant. Call Victor Vitanza . . . , deliberately challenge things that people say in a particular issue of CCC or *Pretext* or. . . . Instead we tend to be real polite. We tend to be quiet, polite, and respectable.

Brannon. I'd like to have some real conversations and debates much like we have on writing center panels at CCCC: the unresolvable issues that make you realize that moral choices are involved in whichever avenues you take. I'd like to see more of that debated.

Harris. But the readership is still varied, and there are people still who want to read it primarily to learn how to set up a writing center. And then there are those of us who have been in this for 10 or 15 years, and we would like to see a little controversy.

North. Yeah. That's an interesting process.

Harris. So we try to include a little of everything, but as you know, that's always dictated by who has submitted what, in a given six months.

Kinkead. And we also went after a secondary [school] audience.

Harris. Not very successful in terms of the number of submissions by people in secondary schools. But occasionally we get one, and I think there are secondary people reading the journal.

Kinkead. Well, I think that the publication of Pam Farrell's book on the high school writing center is signaling that it's OK [for secondary school teachers] to publish and get involved. I think I heard today that over 3,000 copies of that sold.

Speaking of people being respectful, Steve, if we went through the works cited entries of articles, your article on the idea of the writing center is quoted in almost every article that's published.

Brannon. And I think that is such a shame. I've got to write *another* idea of a writing center.

Harris. It has been a real touchstone for everyone. But they may not be saying exactly the same thing. It's just sort of the way people used to cite Aristotle or Kenneth Burke—I'm putting you in good company. But in writing centers that's the way they invoke your name.

Brannon. See, that's a *real* problem. We have got to do something about that! Don't give this guy a big head.

Kinkead. Do you have the same idea of a writing center as you did then?

North. Sure, why not. Let Lil write the next one.

Harris. You're not going to revise yours, huh?

North. I'm not going to rewrite it, no. But we have discussed it at some length, and Lil is ready to write . . .

Brannon. Another idea.

North. You know, basically, "This is a nice view, Steve, but get a wider lens, will you?"

Kinkead. Speaking of writing articles, one time you called me and said that James Raymond had requested an article on writing centers from both of you in response to that resolution [NCTE Resolution on Writing Centers].

Brannon. Steve went to China.

North. We talked about it. And I did go to China. In a sense, speaking only for me particularly, I couldn't cook up . . ., we came up with some things we could say, but they didn't seem to be . . ., I didn't feel like I knew enough about writing centers anymore, in a specific way that I once knew about them. Knew, as you say, everybody and had visited most of the writing centers. I mean, I haven't done that in 10 years. So for me to make a comment about this paper . . ., Lil was in a better position to do it. Basically, she was starting to write her revision of the idea of a writing center.

Brannon. My energy has gone towards trying to challenge students since now I sit in his [Steve's] old office. So, what's changed? How do I think of this differently? How should we be thinking of it differently? I think a lot has changed—getting him out of there.

Kinkead. I think starting journals is a significant service, a contribution to the profession certainly. Do you have any regrets now, in hindsight, about beginning the journal?

North. I misnumbered one set of issues, I know that. And I still blush every time I think of it. I hate it. So embarrassing.

Harris. But you mentioned the time that it required, and, goodness knows, we can appreciate that at this point. Do you wish you had spent that time in other academic pursuits? Do you feel that was time well spent? Or do you have any regrets in terms of the investment of time?

North. Made an awful lot of friends.

Brannon. Got to know a lot of people.

North. I learned a lot.

Brannon. I did, too.

North. Both about politics and economics . . .

Brannon. Politics of institutions, politics of conventions, of people, of just working and trying to get something like that done.



Lil Brannon and **Steve North** administer writing programs at SUNY—Albany.

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