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# What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers

*Muriel Harris*

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In the mid-1970's when large numbers of writing centers were getting started, the most pressing question in the minds of new writing center directors was "What is a writing center?" Now that hundreds of writing centers have been in existence well over a decade, we have moved on to other questions such as "What's new in writing centers?" and "What kinds of traditions have we developed?" These questions suggest that we now have enough history to start taking a longer look at where we've been and where we are going. However, this raises the classic problem of using the term "writing center" as if there were a generic description. The idea of a generic writing center makes us uneasy because it is a truism of this field that writing centers tend to differ from one another because they have evolved within different kinds of institutions and different writing programs and therefore serve different needs. But by surfacing our traditions, we can formulate some general truths about similarities among different writing centers; and by looking for recent trends, we can consider whether we are headed in new directions.

## The Short History of Writing Center Traditions

Perhaps the most obvious thing we can say about our traditions is that we don't have to search any dim, dusty records or reach back into archives that have been shelved for generations. Many of us now active in writing center organizations were the novices ten, twelve, or fourteen years ago who responded to the call for organizing tutorial centers to assist with declining writing skills. But if writing centers have only a short history, it is nevertheless a rather awesome one. In little more than a decade or so, literally hundreds of writing centers have been

established and have become a vital part of composition programs in post-secondary institutions and in language arts programs in secondary schools. Writing programs without a tutorial component for one-to-one collaboration in some form of a writing center are seen to be “incomplete” or lacking. Moreover, national meetings such as the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication, the National Council of Teachers of English conference, and the Writing Program Administration conference regularly have sessions on writing centers. Thus it seems that we can reasonably conclude that in a decade or so, we have indeed become an integral part of writing programs and are recognized as an interest group at conferences.

### **The Tradition of Sharing**

As writing centers started, new directors—unsure of what constituted a writing center—consulted one another, offered advice, and shared what they knew and/or had tried out. And this continues to be true. Thus, one of our firmest traditions, in keeping with our pedagogical approach, is that of helping one another and sharing what we have learned. No other special interest group among composition specialists has such an extensive history of visiting one another’s facilities, phoning for advice, and interacting for the sole purpose of helping one another. Consider the long-standing tradition of materials exchange tables at regional and national writing centers. Similarly, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* began in 1976 at the end of a session on writing centers at the Conference on College Composition and Communication to help the participants of that session keep in touch and continue to exchange ideas and information. And the National Writing Centers Association began as a support group, a central umbrella to encourage regional groups and help them interact.

The tradition of sharing, of helping, of working together may well have been established because of the nature of many of the people who, attracted to the idea of a writing center, became involved in this particular area of composition instruction. It may be that writing centers attract those who are of a helping, nurturing bent anyway, who see themselves as providing ways for others to grow and develop their own skills. The pervasiveness of this can best be seen by some recent examples. At the 1988 conference of the Writing Centers Association: East Central, on the materials exchange table, there were copies of a cookbook put together by the tutors at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Writing Center. Writing center directors who picked up copies didn’t question why a book of recipes was lying among samples of handouts and publicity brochures. Instead, people admired the attractive format, browsed through the recipes, and were overheard to offer such comments as “I’ll give this to our tutors, who are always bringing in such interesting food for our parties” or “Our staff meetings always focus on good food too—our tutors should put together a similar book.” Every writing center may not be staffed by tutors who are gourmet chefs, but food

or drink is often in view. There are coffee pots, dishes of candy, and open houses that lure students in with popcorn and doughnuts. Providing nourishment is a constant activity in writing centers, and all that flow of food seems like a natural accompaniment.

As a further example of this mindset, the September 1988 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* collected several articles on diverse topics—principles of tutor selection, the need for research in writing centers, and a perspective on drop-in tutorials, and the discussion in each article was cast in food metaphors. The response to that issue of the newsletter was immediate, hearty, and appreciative. Readers were apparently responding to some sense of “rightness” in these nurturing, nutritive analogies, and in doing so were reflecting some of what they see themselves as doing. If we were to cast about for various metaphors and analogies for the role of writing centers, we might instead try other stances such as being havens for students caught in impersonal, anonymous institutions or being liberators of students forced to conform to textbook and large group requirements. Perhaps such views (or others) exist, but they don’t resonate through the literature of writing centers. Instead, there is a very noticeable tradition of perceiving writing centers as nurturing, helping places which provide assistance to other writing centers and sustenance to students to help them grow, mature, and become independent.

## **The Tradition of Mystifying Our Colleagues**

The nutritive metaphor may be a tradition in writing centers, but it is a view from the inside, for there is another tradition that persists when we shift our point of view and look at writing centers from the outside. From this other perspective we are traditionally seen as somewhat of a mystery to our colleagues. What exactly is it writing centers do? Are we running only remedial centers, places to salvage some of the “boneheads” that have been permitted to enroll (for however brief a tenure) in our institutions? Are we band-aid clinics offering clean-up service for papers about to be handed in? Such questions persist with the tenacity of barnacles. We seem forever to be countering these and other equally limited notions. But why do we perennially have to keep explaining ourselves? And why do we keep doing it from a somewhat defensive posture? I certainly find myself explaining, year after year, what a writing center can and does do, and every fall at the start of the new academic year I have an hour to meet with new members of our composition staff. At that orientation session I usually pass around portfolios of materials. The cover letter is as positive as I can be, explaining the rationale for a writing center and the benefits to students and instructors, but buried in there is a section called “Some Myths About Writing Centers.” Here I deal with all the old familiar misapprehensions: that using the lab is a sign of a teacher’s incompetence, that only the “basket cases” and remedial writers need a writing lab, that a writing lab is only for grammar

problems, that the tutors write the papers for the students and/or hand them the answers they should find themselves, that the tutors offer evaluative comments, and so on.

Such an effort is hardly unique. At Boise State University, where Richard Leahy, the Writing Center director, issues a monthly newsletter to the faculty, the September 1988 issue of his newsletter (reprinted in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*) was dedicated to correcting similar misunderstandings. Entitling the issue “Seven Myth-Understandings about the Writing Center,” Leahy and his co-author Roy Fox attacked seven myths that prevail on their campus: 1) The writing center is a remedial service for poor writers, 2) The writing center is mainly concerned with competency exams, 3) The writing center is only for students in English classes, 4) The writing center does work for students that they should be doing on their own, 5) Faculty should require students to visit the writing center, 6) The writing center only helps with essays and term papers, and 7) The writing center is only for students. The recurring themes sound like a litany.

As a further example of what I mean about the persistence of misunderstanding, consider Stephen North’s article in the September 1984 issue of *College English*. North begins with an explosion of emotion with which too many of us can and do identify:

This is an essay that began out of frustration. . . . The source of my frustration? Ignorance: the members of my profession, my colleagues, people I might see at MLA or CCCC or read in the pages of *College English* do not understand what I do. They do not understand what does happen, what can happen, in a writing center. (433)

Deeply frustrated by the prevailing view among the faculty in his department that the writing center is a fix-it shop or a place for students with “special problems,” North reminds us of the prevalence of this view in earlier books and articles and cites a study by Malcolm Hayward, who found that the primary criteria among faculty at his institution for referring students to the writing center were problems with grammar and punctuation. Those of us in writing centers may agree with North’s explanations of what we are really about, but the point here is that in 1988 Richard Leahy is still busy explaining to the faculty at his institution what a writing center is. And Diana George, at the 1987 Midwest Association of Departments of English, was asked to speak to this group of department heads about writing centers. In an article based on her experience, George reports a very positive interest among the administrators to whom she talked, but doesn’t overlook the “bad news: Many still do not know us, do not know what we can offer them, do not know how we work with students” (38). There seems to be a long and tenacious tradition of not understanding or misunderstanding what writing centers are about. As North laments, it is even

more disappointing when the most blatant blindness and the most simplistic views are held by colleagues in our departments who are otherwise interested in and knowledgeable about the teaching of writing.

What, one wonders, causes this gulf between writing centers and teachers of writing? Why do they think we're merely band-aid grammar clinics for the terminally thick-headed? It may be that we operate within a different perspective of education—individualized instruction, a form of learning so far removed from the perspective of most teachers that they don't know how to begin to think about what we do. After all, most educators think of education in group terms. Students sit in classes, move in groups, pass through educational systems in large numbers. If someone uses the word "student," there is a generic student in mind. Classroom teachers of writing can talk about "the writing process" as if it applies universally to all writers, about textbooks that work for whole levels of students (e.g., basic writers, traditional freshmen, advanced composition, and so on). Yet, what writing centers are about is the antithesis of generic, mass instruction. We are committed to individualized instruction, to taking the student out of the group and to looking at her as an individual, as a person with all her uniqueness. Sitting down in a tutorial with a student, we know that our job, in North's neat phrase, "is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438).

Committed to working with the whole person, we train ourselves to ask about that particular person's writing processes, about her past history, about her perception of her assignment, about her particular problems, about her questions. When that student leaves, we know that the next person we work with will be equally unique. We know that the deadliest thing we can do is to treat two writers alike. Thus, we don't merely value the individual student; we focus on that student's individuality as a basis for whatever help we can offer. And therein lies the secret of some of our success. When large-group instruction isn't cutting it, when textbooks and classroom explanations evaporate into airy abstractions, when generalities fail to make connections to the specific writing task the writer is engaged in, then the tutor and student engage in dialogue that leads to making those connections. This kind of help assists writers in moving forward with a piece of writing. Another kind of help is that collaborative dialogue between writer and responding reader that helps the writer move beyond herself as composer to see what she is offering her readers. Collaboration, with the tutor serving as reader/responder, usually intermingles with the collaborative effort to help the writer compose more effectively. All of this goes on in the one-to-one setting of a tutorial as we know, but our colleagues outside the writing center don't seem to know it.

This tradition of misunderstanding is so persistent that it isn't likely to disappear unless we address the composition community in ways we haven't yet done, for writing centers also have a tradition of not speaking up effectively. There have been endless calls for research in the writing center, to validate and

elucidate what we do, and it is a tradition that we keep on making those calls—and not answering them. Far too little research, especially research that will wake up and inform our colleagues, has been conducted in our writing centers. And there have been far too few articles presenting general theories of individualized instruction. We have, in fact, talked too much to ourselves in our journals and at our conferences (and in those phone calls and visits) and not enough to the world of composition outside. But it is most likely not a matter of more journal articles about what writing centers do (for North’s article articulated that very well) or more campus newsletters explaining ourselves to our colleagues—we can see that these solutions haven’t seemed to change matters much. Some more effective approach, stance, action, or method of explanation is apparently needed.

### **The Tradition of Being at the Bottom of the Totem Pole**

A concurrent tradition to being misunderstood is being undervalued. We traditionally have been the field hands waiting at the back door for a few scraps from the table of the real folk dining inside. Yes, we make jokes about “winging it” with no budget and too few tutors, about making midnight raids down the hall to “liberate” furniture from other facilities and offices, about having less clout than the night janitor. We tend to be grateful for minimal responses to our requests, and we lose people who see themselves as “moving up” when they go on to direct the freshman composition program or take some other administrative position. Believing in what we do, we tend to accept lower salaries, poorer working conditions, lower status.

The National Writing Centers Association position statement on writing centers, recently adopted by the National Council of Teachers of English, will help—and it is a major step in the right direction—but too many of us have a tradition of letting ourselves be sold short. We find our compensation in our work, knowing that what we do is effective and right, but that shouldn’t deter us from taking stronger stances in demonstrating that the needs of our writing centers are legitimate and that our work should be valued as a major responsibility.

One way to see how others view the role of being a writing center director is to look at job postings. One that I recently received was from a university seeking someone with experience in writing assessment who could also teach undergraduate and graduate courses in rhetoric. And by the way, that person will be a half-time lab director responsible for training tutors, developing materials, etc. That may sound like a job that would best be filled by several people, but someone will take it. Writing center administration is still too often something we are supposed to do with our left hand while focusing our “quality time” on all of our other responsibilities.

## **The Tradition of Incorporating Collaborative Learning**

It may seem that writing centers have some discouraging traditions that we've lived with for too long, but there are also other traditions that we can view far more positively. For example, writing centers from their first blossoming have a tradition of enriching the world of learning by adding a new dimension—collaborative learning—in which the writer and the tutor remove themselves from that other traditional world of teacher and student, the one in which the student is expected to remain passive and receive what the instructor gives him. We've added to traditional instruction this new dimension of students leading each other to greater understanding and enhanced skills. Peer tutors have a power—and responsibility—and a goal—of being other than a teacher. The students they work with are given encouragement and an opportunity to shake off their passive classroom stance and assume some responsibility for getting involved with their own learning. That's even more heretical than we might imagine as there is a general assumption that good teachers in classrooms also actively involve their students in responding to questions.

However, we can understand more fully why writing labs differ from classrooms and why students come in meekly expecting someone to give them the answer if we can see what is happening in classrooms. One study which lets us peer into a large number of classrooms was done by Carol Barnes, and it indicates how little question-asking actually goes on in classrooms. For the study, Barnes surveyed forty college classrooms in large and small public institutions, large private universities, and small private colleges, in both beginning and advanced courses in a variety of disciplines. She found that the mean percentage of time spent on question asking is close to 3.65%. Of that tiny portion of class time spent on questioning, 63% of the questions were classified as cognitive memory questions, questions asking students to recapitulate, to clarify, or to offer factual information. Questions calling for other kinds of thinking were less frequently asked. And so we can see that the collaboration of the tutorial is indeed a very different mode of learning for students. The closest thing to compare it to in the classroom is the collaboration of peer response groups, but recent work on peer response groups has indicated some of the difficulties of this setting.

## **The Tradition of Tutors' Personal Enrichment**

As a corollary to the tradition of active involvement in learning, of making the student a participant instead of a passive listener, writing centers have a tradition of offering a kind of experience for tutors that is not offered elsewhere in the academic setting. Through training courses, at conferences, and at work, tutors are developing skills and talents that enhance their own writing skills, their understanding of the learning processes, their interpersonal skills, their

awareness of writing processes, and their employability. Contributing to the institutionalizing of tutoring, having students learn how to help others learn, is a tradition of which writing center directors have long been aware and can be proud. Educators concerned with the training of future teachers are beginning to recognize this additional kind of “field experience” for education majors and are making use of writing centers as teacher training grounds. Offering course credit for tutoring, as is done in many writing centers, is a means of recognizing what tutors learn as they tutor. As we note what tutors learn, it should not surprise us that they tend to be so evangelical about what they do. At tutoring conferences and in articles written by tutors, we don’t hear negative voices or disillusioned sneers. Instead, these tutors have entered a realm they find exhilarating.

### **The Tradition of Being People-Oriented**

One more tradition to add to this list of what has stayed constant in the short history of most writing centers is that they have remained people-oriented. When writing centers were beginning to define themselves and their roles, there was some concern that two models were developing, the writing center with people collaborating with people and the writing lab with rows of study carrels where students would be plugged into appropriate hardware, software, tapes, screens, and anything else that ran by itself with little or no human intervention. (See, for example, Muriel Harris, “Process and Product: Dominant Models for Writing Centers.”) The problem of insufficient staff continues to plague some writing centers, and computers for word processing have become useful aids to revision in writing centers with funds for this type of resource. But writing centers have remained in the human realm of interaction and collaboration, using machines as supplements, but never losing sight of the value of the tutorial. This may, in part, reflect the general trend away from self-instruction facilities and the generally disappointing lack of computer software that will do anything more pedagogically respectable than drill-and-practice. But it may also be that writing centers have defined themselves primarily as tutorial centers.

### **Trends in Writing Centers**

While there are clearly traditions that delineate some of the consistent characteristics of writing centers, there are also accompanying trends, changes and new directions that also define writing centers. In one sense, there are always new directions because writing centers tend to grow, develop, change, respond to new challenges, try new services, shift gears when something bombs out, and add something that the director learned about from an article, conference talk, or visit to another center. There is no sense of stagnation in writing centers, surely, but there are also a few general trends in addition to the

normal growth of writing centers within their own institutions as they respond to local needs.

### 1. Toward Greater Professionalism

One very definite trend is that there is a new sense of professionalism in the air. Ten or twelve years ago new directors were often selected solely on the basis of their interest or willingness to learn about writing centers, and directors continue to be hired with little or no prior experience. However, graduate programs in rhetoric and composition, which are flourishing in numerous institutions, are producing specialists in composition who have training and experience in writing centers. Job descriptions for writing center directors are likely to list as necessary credentials for application advanced degrees in composition with some background and training in writing centers. Graduate students going out on the job market often have academic coursework, experience, and publications in the field to offer. Among peer tutors, there are English education majors who have gone on to set up or work in high school writing centers. This new professionalism is the result of writing center administrators having nurtured new people in the field who won't begin at ground zero, where directors usually began a dozen years ago. Dissertations are also being done on writing centers, and—the true mark of a burgeoning field of inquiry—there is such a huge body of literature about tutoring and writing centers (gathered in the annual bibliographies in the *The Writing Center Journal*) that it is difficult to keep up with it all.

### 2. Away from the Label of “Remedial Only”

Another trend, a heartening one, is that writing centers have weathered the backlash against remedial studies by no longer being generally viewed as nothing but remedial services. Yes, the myth persists, but it is not a universal one, and the variety of responsibilities writing centers have taken on help to dispel the simplistic view that students who need help with writing always have major deficiencies in basic skills. Having taken on more responsibilities with writing across the curriculum, with writing assessment, and with teacher training, writing centers have redefined themselves. There is still a tendency among too many teachers to think of the writing center as the place to work with students who have “problems,” but at least there is a recognition even here that this can be ordinary students in freshman composition, not just developmental students “with severe problems.”

### 3. Growth in High School Writing Centers

Another healthy trend is the proliferation of writing centers in high schools. At the meetings of the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Writing Centers Association has sponsored sessions and all-day workshops for

high school teachers who are starting writing centers; at regional writing center conferences there is a growing participation of high school writing center directors; and articles about high school writing centers appear almost monthly in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*. High school directors of writing centers are particularly involved with the integration of writing skills into courses other than English.

#### 4. Toward Integration with Classrooms

Another trend is the melding of our pedagogy with classroom instruction in interesting new ways. There are writing centers that send peer tutors to classrooms to lead small groups in workshop classrooms, there are other centers where the peer response groups from the classrooms come to the center to work, and there are collaborative writing activities that tie classroom and writing lab together. As a way to help our colleagues learn about what we do, this may be a particularly encouraging trend. In addition, it offers us some interesting new ways to expand the role of the tutor.

#### 5. Toward Serving More Non-Traditional Students

Yet another trend is that in many colleges writing centers are serving a growing population of non-traditional students. We are hearing and reading more about writing centers that are adding interesting new services, such as courses taught through centers for older, returning students and part-time students from the community. We are beginning to find imaginative ways to serve the unique needs of this population, in offering them support, counseling, tutoring opportunities, and a place to work on skills that may have gotten a bit rusty. With 45 percent of the nation's college population now over 25, writing centers will become increasingly important as part of the system of support services these people need.

### **Some Conclusions and Speculations**

But what can we make of all this? On one hand, there are traditions that define the very essence of writing centers. Given the endurance of these traditions, they are likely to continue as defining characteristics. It would seem a safe generalization to say that writing centers have defined their goals and unique approaches and that they have gained a sense of permanence and a level of professionalism that has established writing centers as integral parts of writing instruction. Moreover, while the wider field of composition seems subject to constant winds of change and trends that overtake the national conferences and journals, only to be swept aside in a year or two, writing centers seem on a steadier course. We have experienced growth and expansion but no major swings, shifts, or redefinitions of interests. While some of our traditions suggest that writing centers merely need to maintain a steady course, others indicate a need for more or different effort, particularly in the areas of educating colleagues

and of doing the kinds of research that validate writing centers' claims of success and define what individualized instruction is. Only a concerted effort to explain what writing center instruction is and what writing centers are about will reduce our ever-present paranoia and sense of living at the periphery (or the bottom rung of the composition ladder).

The trends that are currently evident in writing centers point to continued growth and some additional services and students we can and are working with. We don't seem to be shifting course in any major way. If anything, we can probably say we are in a period of consolidation and on a steady course. In sum, we have traditions to be proud of and some trends that will keep us busy developing new services and moving in new directions. Clearly, we are still a growth industry—and that may be the best tradition of all.

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