The "Smack of Difference": The Language of Writing Center Discourse

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... As long as thinking and writing are regarded as inherently individual, solitary activities, writing centers can never be viewed as anything more than pedagogical fix-it shops to help those who, for whatever reason, are unable to think and write on their own. This understanding of thinking and writing not only places writing centers on the periphery of most colleges, where our second-class status is symbolized by our basement offices and inadequate staffs and budgets, it also places us on the periphery of our own field of composition studies.


In a recently published article Lisa Ede repeats a persistent cry from writing center professionals that, if we are to carve out for ourselves a place in academe, we need to define the writing center. Ede goes so far as to call upon us to invent ourselves (5). Though it seems late in the game for such proclamations, Ede's position is no novelty: To read the publications of writing center teachers and administrators is to listen to a disenfranchised voice from the margins telling a tale of painful marginality. To free ourselves, Ede, Stephen North ("Writing Center Research"), and other writing center theorists call for a grounding theory and legitimizing research (usually conceived of on the scientific, empirical model).
These repeated calls for self-definition form a distinct segment of writing center discourse, an address at once hopeful and despairing, intensely aware of writing center history yet unaware—perhaps as a rhetorical strategy—of previous calls for self-definition. It is as though each theorist must begin anew the process of awakening the slumbering writing center profession to the urgent need for self-creation. Perhaps this is how all revolutions begin, with a series of calls to the ramparts or a series of revolutionary proclamations before one document captures the imagination of the disenfranchised and is recognized by historians as the "real" beginning of the revolution. In any event, the tactics or approaches to self-definition are several:

(1) Writing centers need to move towards institutionalization, working within the power structures of the university to gain acceptance in their supplementary role. The language of this approach is abstract and conciliatory, with the most common term being integration.

(2) Writing centers need to move towards independence, asserting their difference from English department instruction and their first allegiance to students, not to faculty or administrators. Operative metaphors here include appeals to nature, holism, and power.

(3) Writing centers need to define themselves according to their true pedagogy, collaborative learning, and the theory behind this pedagogy, social constructionism. Here the terms knowledge, discourse, and social context abound, and the metaphor of community reigns supreme.

Obviously overlapping occurs among these strains. Lisa Ede, for example, aligns herself with social constructionists even as she claims that the goal of a self-defining writing center theory is the successful integration into our own discipline of composition studies: "We are part of but not fully integrated into our own discipline" (5-7). Somewhat disturbing in a theorist seeking a foundation for writing center studies is Ede's assumption that composition studies is "our own discipline," a claim which if considered carefully denies writing centers an autonomous identity since they are once again placed on the fringes of another field, the legitimacy of their existence dependent on the recognition of others. Will writing centers succeed in inventing themselves by taking on the identity of composition studies? The theoretical discourse of writing center professionals repeatedly exhibits this contradiction: The need for independent existence is couched in terms that deny our independent existence.

All these efforts at and calls for self-definition are, of course, expressed in language, appearing in articles written for The Writing Center Journal, The Writing Lab Newsletter, occasionally College English or College Composition and Communication, and in anthologies like Olson's Writing Centers: Theory and
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Administration or Muriel Harris' Tutoring Writing. Reading these articles and books on writing center theory and practice, I find a discourse articulated in dualities, and at the heart of these pairs of opposites lies a founding contrast of writing center instruction to classroom instruction. No matter what the theoretical approach, theorists find themselves saying that the writing center is what it is because it is different from classroom instruction. In examining this assumption and the language in which it is expressed, I hope to propose yet another route to writing center self-definition: a study of our own discourse.

The worst thing I can do is to defend my writing laboratory in terms that smack of difference—terms which can be easily misinterpreted or denied by my colleagues in the regular composition program.

Irvin Hashimoto, "Writing Laboratory 'Image' or How Not to Write to Your Dean" [WCJ, Fall/Winter, 1982]

Despite Irvin Hashimoto’s fear of the writing center’s difference from more powerful forces in the university—one has to wonder at his use of the term colleague—writing center professionals persistently define their instruction against that of the classroom. All too often their writings confirm Mr. Hashimoto’s warning to the oppressed to avoid noticeable difference: the discourse of difference sets up pairs of terms leading the writing center theorist to adopt the secondary role relegated by more powerful university entities. Typically these dichotomies arrange themselves hierarchically, as in the following list in which the first terms are associated with the marginal instruction offered at the writing center and the second terms with traditional classroom instruction in composition: grammar instruction versus instruction in rhetoric and the writing process; non-traditional students versus mainstream students; informal versus formal instruction; supplemental assistance versus classroom instruction; basic writing versus comprehensive program. The terms ancillary and supplementary are common indeed (Bamberg 179; Almasy 13; Hunt 67; Hawkins, N. 7; Arfken 121; Jonz & Harris 216; Solinger 65; Brooks & Hawkins 98; etc.), sometimes because the classroom is still ceded the primary responsibility of teaching rhetoric while the writing center teaches grammar (Epes, Kirkpatrick & Southwell 140, 142), but more often because the classroom teacher has more secure status and more power. Even in articles which do not overtly refer to the writing center as supplementary and marginal, this dualistic terminology defines the writing center as an inferior, incomplete entity, primarily in relation to an entity assumed to have achieved a fuller, more respectable status—the classroom.
This dualistic thinking does, of course, allow theorists to invert the hierarchy to claim superiority over the classroom in some ways. Among writing center professionals there is near unanimity in the assumptions that writing center students take initiative, have open time, work alone or in small groups, work in a warm setting, are close to the instructor, and work on writing in progress at any stage without fear of judgment; while in classes students are passive, have time limits, work in large groups in impersonal settings at a distance from the instructor, and approach writing as a product to be judged (e.g., North, “Idea” 440-42; Freedman, “A Theoretic Context” 2-3 and “Research” 95; Hawkins, T. 28, 30; Roderick 32; Steward & Croft 5; Arfken 111; Harris, M., “Process and Product” 1-2). Now the writing center pedagogy assumes the superior position in the binary structure whereas the classroom pedagogy appears inferior. It doesn’t take too much analysis to recognize the over-generalizations in these formulaic claims, for example, that the writing classroom necessarily creates an impersonal setting. The inadequacy of such a formulation follows from the inadequacy of the dualistic language and habit of thought in our attempts to define ourselves against the writing classroom.

The discourse often employs spatial metaphors in asserting the superiority of the writing center over the classroom as a learning environment. The assets of the writing center most commonly cited are the supportive atmosphere (Almasy 16; Hartwell 59; Hawkins & Brooks vii); the nonthreatening and trusting environment (Spear 70; Freedman, “A Theoretic Context” 7; Brostoff 21; Fishman 89); the comfortable and relaxed surroundings (Mills 74; Flynn 177); and the genuine community of learners the writing center creates and harbors (Bannister-Wills 132; Arkin 32; Bruffee, “Peer Tutoring” 8). The classroom, by contrast, creates a threatening, tense environment that tends to isolate individuals rather than form them into a learning community.

Because we are defining the writing center as a place which is not the writing classroom, the negative quality of the spatial metaphor distorts the effort of self-definition. Is the writing center essentially a place different from another place? Is the writing center only a “non-traditional setting” (Ashton-Jones 31), an “uncontrolled world” in contrast to “the controlled environment of the classroom” (Lotto 13)? Is that place other than the writing center necessarily the classroom? Why not the place for faculty conferences, the office? The metaphorical contrast of writing center with classroom has been expressed so literally as an environment that the discourse becomes constricted, inhibiting effective communication. For example, when the writing center speaks of itself as a place of nurture, in contrast to the classroom as a place of torture, communication problems between writing center personnel and composition teachers can arise (Nash 38).

The latest version of these spatial metaphors sees the writing center as a natural ecosystem, a metaphor picked up from Marilyn Cooper’s “The Ecology
of Writing” and used in a number of current articles (e.g., Ede 10; Johnstone 51). This metaphor finds ready acceptance among writing center professionals because the ground has been prepared by earlier metaphorical forays into images of nature and of wholeness. If the writing center is to be defined against the classroom, a place which has achieved a fullness, a completeness, it must tap into some larger system of values. What better place to go to seek the healing of undifferentiated wholeness than nature—a primary and simpler state of being. For example, writing center instruction is seen as “natural” (North, “Idea” 439; Veit 12), making use of what is known about the “natural” development of language skills (Hartwell 55, 59; Veit 11; Spear 62; Freedman, “A Theoretic Context” 8; Reigstad & McAndrew 9). The metaphor extends to organic processes of intellectual and writing development, processes which writing center pedagogy taps into. Tutors are advised to trust their instincts rather than hew to conscious rules (Hartwell 59-60) and to react spontaneously rather than follow numbered steps (Reigstad & McAndrew 33). Thus the writing center pedagogy enjoys a superiority over unnatural classroom pedagogy, which violates this natural development of writing skills. A related metaphor sees writing centers as healthy, growing organisms, spreading and vital (Hayhoe 252; Jonz & Harris 218, 226; Solinger 68; Freedman, “Research” 85; Brooks & Hawkins 99; Moseley 34; Kelly 15; North, “Idea” 437). But beneath this enthusiastic and optimistic metaphor lies the fear that if writing centers become static, they will not survive.

In trying to define the writing center as a whole entity separate unto itself, the discourse flounders repeatedly on dualistic comparisons with the writing classroom. In imitation of composition studies, there is an effort to define the writing center through research. For example, Aviva Freedman, in her essay “Research and the Writing Center,” calls for research leading to the comprehensive knowledge of writing which will serve as a foundation for writing center pedagogy. However, at the same time she recognizes that our knowledge currently is fragmentary, an unfortunate situation to be remedied in the future. But in the very essay which validates comprehensiveness as a necessity for a defined writing center pedagogy, Freedman declares her discussion to be “selective” and “idiosyncratic,” not “definitive” nor a “synthesis of current research” (Freedman, “Research” 84, 91). Obviously she is taking advantage of the fragmentary nature of writing center theory to write a fragmentary article, itself a model of the incompleteness she deplores. The metaphor of completeness operates to undermine the opposite position as well: theorists who accept the writing center as part of a larger whole, and therefore incomplete in itself, also use the term “comprehensive laboratory” to describe its functions, thus revealing a desire for wholeness and completeness in a pedagogy which covers all pedagogical bases (Bates 214; Hayhoe 246; Cobb & Elledge 127; Nash 35) and which works with the whole student (Hayward 7-8).
These language problems arise in part because writing center discourse posits the individual as a conceptual unity. There is an overwhelming consensus that the chief pedagogy of the writing center is one-to-one instruction, which allows individualized attention to writing problems (Steward & Croft 5; Reigstad & McAndrew 2, 28; Solinger 65; Kirkpatrick 15; Bates 207; Hawkins & Brooks vii; Harris, M., “Process and Product” 1-2). The common perception is that a single tutor works best with the unique writing processes of a single student (Kelly 10; Stull 19; North, “Idea” 439). Of course many theorists mention the additional possibility of small group work, but this type of instruction is usually seen as secondary to individualized instruction (Olson, “Introduction” xi; Bannister-Wills 141; Freedman, “A Theoretic Context” 5-7; Harris, M., “Individualized Diagnosis”).

A few dissenting voices have pointed up the dangers of the unexamined pedagogy of individualized instruction. Kenneth Bruffee, for example, sees learning and tutoring as social—not individual—processes, and he positions a community of learners between reader and writer or tutor and tutee (Bruffee, “Peer Tutoring” 11, 13). Tilly Eggers agrees, seeing social communication as the central goal and individual tutoring on specific problems as a means to a social end (37). In suggesting that one-on-one tutoring reinforces the tutor as an authority, Karen Spear advocates group learning as a method of encouraging independent thought and writing (71; see also Eggers 37-39). The social nature of thinking and writing not only suggests problems with the individualist assumptions of tutoring, but also denies the separate totality of the individual writer: the individual’s very thought processes are social in function and origins. But as Lisa Ede points out, even Bruffee is inconsistent, speaking of writing as an inherently solitary activity in the old tradition of individual creation (6) and we recall where Ede says that conception of writing places the writing center.

Repeatedly, writing center articles gloss over inconsistencies and claim both collaborative learning and individual one-on-one tutoring as theoretical bases defining the writing center. Evelyn Ashton-Jones notes that scholars assert that “the writing center, by definition, is not another classroom; rather, it is an alternative which, according to Tilly and John Warnock, commits us to ‘individuation rather than to mass production, to growth from within rather than to packaging from without’” (30-31). Beginning with the notion that the writing center is what it is because it is not the classroom, she concludes, as do most theorists, that what makes the writing center different is its commitment to seeing writers as individuals. This conclusion also confers a second-class status upon us, as in Nathaniel Hawkins’ clear division between the traditional classroom and the supplementary writing center (7). But rarely do theorists recognize the inconsistency of claiming, as does Nathaniel Hawkins, that the supplementary writing center creates a collaborative environment whereas the classroom promotes individual learning, while also proclaiming the one-to-one
nature of writing center tutoring (7, 10-11). Does not the pedagogy of individuation—working one to one—in some way contradict the collaborative theory of learning? Ashton-Jones likewise cites Bruffee’s theory of collaboration while counseling individualized, tutor-centered pedagogies promoting the acquisition by students of their own writing (30, 32), never recognizing the contradiction of using social constructionist theory to support a highly individualist pedagogy in which students own their writing.

To return to the use of spatial metaphors to define the writing center, it is interesting to note that when theorists shift their attention to the larger environment outside the laboratory, their emphasis is not upon the trusting atmosphere for students but on the desperate need of writing center professionals to communicate to administrators and faculty the importance of writing center services to the university (Neuleib 229; Bates 206 ff.; Hayhoe 252). The usual assumption is that better record keeping, accountability studies, and communications will shore up the weak image of the writing center. A strong vein of paranoia runs through this discourse: writing centers have not yet found their place in the university (Nash 39). Nor have the tutoring personnel. Some argue that writing center tutors need a sense of their place in the larger university environment to overcome the alienation they currently feel (Arkin 26; Hawkins, T. 28, 30; Warnock & Warnock 16 ff.).

Thus a double environment emerges: the small, protective environment within the writing center and the wide, threatening environment of the university. It is as though the writing center seeks to create a new environment to protect students and in the process finds itself alienated from the old environment (e.g., the classroom) that it defines itself against. At the heart of the new environment is the personalized, human contact which overcomes students' alienation, a pedagogy relying on individualized instruction (Harris, J. 148; Olson, “Problem” 167; Hawkins, T. 27; Arfken 111; Bamberg 185; Almasy 14). We have, therefore, a tutor alienated from the larger university working with a student similarly alienated, their one-to-one interaction providing relief and refuge from the negative forces of the university. It would seem, then, that in defining itself as an environment apart from the classrooms of the larger university, the writing center threatens to cut off its students and its pedagogy from the larger community of learners in the university.

Political realities, however, often move the discourse in precisely the opposite direction, from segregation towards integration. While theorists may deplore the second-class status of the writing center (Kirkpatrick 19) and demand more power (Bruffee, “The Politics of Innovation” 59; Arkin 26), they accept the marginalization of the writing center as a political fact of university life (Fearing & Sparrow 215; Almasy 13; Hunt 67; Arfken 121; Bamberg 179; Hayward 10; Hashimoto 3; Jonz & Harris 218; Hayhoe 248; Arkin 26).
Recognizing the danger of locating the writing center on the fringes of the university, most theorists counsel incorporation within the larger, protective university, evident in a terminology of reconciliation: though the writing center definitely is not a classroom, its work should be coordinated with, not separated from, coursework (Epes, Kirkpatrick & Southwell 140, 142); there should be collaboration between classroom teacher and writing center personnel (Bamberger 179); and writing center instruction should become an integral part of classroom instruction in writing, with course credit, for example, given for work students do there (Flynn 172, 176). The most commonly used term in these discussions, integration, presupposes the opposite, segregation, to be an undesirable option: the writing center cannot operate alone (Jonz & Harris 216). Most presume the necessity for writing centers to become an integral part of the larger institution and to establish ties with other university units such as English classes (Flynn 172), support services like tutoring programs (Solinger 69), and comprehensive programs (Bates 214; Hayhoe 246; Bruffee, “The Politics of Innovation” 55; Steward & Croft 4).

To sum up, this dualistic structure of the writing center as different from the composition classroom leads the discourse into theoretical difficulties. It simultaneously asserts and denies its own authority, its right to be different. Where its pedagogy suggests the fact (and desirability) of separation from the classroom, its position in the university suggests the urgent need for integration, particularly between writing centers and English departments (Arfken 111, 121; Glassman 124; Epes, Kirkpatrick & Southwell 132, 143; Flynn 170; Bates 206; Hawkins & Brooks vii). Such integration requires, however, a more careful articulation of collaborative needs in order to avoid a “them-versus-us” rhetoric, a rhetoric easy to fall into because writing centers are different (Brooks & Hawkins 97-98). Irvin Hashimoto, on the other hand, insists that the writing center is not different in kind, quality, or mission from the classroom, and the worst thing writing center administrators can do is to defend the writing center “in terms that smack of difference” (Hashimoto 3). The discourse both celebrates and desires to overcome the writing center’s difference, suggesting the dilemma of articulating the writing center in terms of opposition to composition courses.

Conclusion

The metaphor of parts and wholes expresses the current failure of efforts to define the writing center. If seen as a part of a larger whole, the writing center must seek integration and assimilation by accepting its current marginality and disunified diversity of functions. From this perspective the writing center is no more than the site of various writing tasks no other university entity wants to handle. In effect, this position cedes any claim to self-definition since the writing center is seen as the opposite of a definable entity: it is a gap in the
university structure, an absence capable of fulfilling any role assigned to it. On the other hand, in attempting to define the writing center as different from standard university entities like the English department or the composition classroom, theorists seek a defining wholeness or center articulating an independent selfhood for the writing center. This enterprise, however, marks the writing center as similar to those very entities it would define itself against, precisely because the writing center must become whole and self-integrated like them. This desire for unity sits uneasily with the views that the strength of the writing center pedagogy lies in its diversity and flexibility.

These self-defeating efforts at definition are traceable to the language used in writing center discourse. Divisions within terms undermine assumed unities. For example, in thinking about the writing center in contrast to the classroom, both those who see the writing center as a supplement to the classroom and those who reject this second-class status assume that the classroom enjoys a self-sufficiency, an undivided wholeness uncontaminated by the writing problems brought by the wave of non-traditional students. To pick up this disease metaphor, the writing center (often designated the “laboratory” or “clinic”) becomes the field hospital for underprepared (diseased) students. In the process of treating the writing wounds of these students outside the classroom, writing center professionals have discovered that classroom practices—matters of time, grading, assignments, authority—may in fact contribute to (if not constitute) the disease. The discourse divides when faced with this disconcerting sign of the classroom’s failure: some counsel an independent pedagogy to replace that of the classroom; most continue to maintain the support-service attitude. But all accept the fiction of the classroom as whole and undivided—and the corollary fiction of the writing center as outside mainstream teaching, a pedagogy/place that was a necessary supplement to the original classroom which, despite its self-sufficiency, still needs supplementary instruction from the writing center.

To escape this entrapping logic of the supplement, writing center discourse needs to examine the relationship of writing center to composition classroom in a new way—and with a new language. To define the writing center as simply different from or the same thing as the classroom is to fall into the structuralist trap of dualities, a way of thinking indicated by the consistent habit of describing the writing center as either superior or inferior to the composition classroom. If we look upon classroom teaching as incomplete rather than self-sufficient and unified, we can recognize in classroom practices traces of writing center instruction—perhaps even recognize the classroom teacher's authority as a supplement to the Socratic tutoring at the heart of all teaching. Similarly, the group instruction assumed to belong to the classroom belongs as much to the writing center, suggesting that the writing center always contains within itself this trace of the classroom. In our efforts at self-definition, then, we are not so much inventing ourselves as reinventing ourselves, and we should not so easily cede the label “traditional” to classroom instruction. Perhaps it is time for us to
think of the classroom as existing to get students back to the writing center, the traditional site of language instruction.

The divided language of writing center publications suggests that as writing professionals we are still seeking a usable language with which to define ourselves and to communicate to other teaching and university professionals. What I am suggesting is that we look upon the writing center not as a place, nor as something different from the classroom, but more like Stephen North does in his article "The Idea of a Writing Center." The writing center is an idea—in language. The writing center is our words, a linguistic phenomenon. It is a text still in the process of composition, one segment of which is the metadiscourse of our efforts at self-definition. We need to become more self-conscious of how we talk to ourselves.

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