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The Evolution of a Writing Center: 1972-1990

William Yahner and William Murdick

Our writing center was a war baby, born out of the clamor and clash and confusion of open admissions, student rights, and the literacy crisis of the 1970s. We place its inception in the year 1972 when a small committee attempted to devise a response to what our administrators were calling "the new student." The committee sent a letter to 62 universities, colleges, and junior colleges around the country containing this request:

If you have any departmental statements and/or brochures on your Writing Laboratory, "remedial" English courses, and other programs geared to aid the student who needs extra guidance and instruction in order to gain the competency and required "skills," I would appreciate them.

In the return mail came 550 pages of letters, reports, program descriptions, memos, policy statements, and whatnot, from 41 institutions. The responses filled two notebooks and were dubbed the "Jensen Papers" after Paul Jensen, the now-retired professor who had conceived the idea, written the letters of inquiry, interviewed people at the 1972 MLA conference, and otherwise done most of the work. Out of that research, our school, California University of Pennsylvania (CUP)—one of fourteen state colleges (now universities) in the Pennsylvania system—developed a complete new first-year program, including courses, testing, and a writing center.

Shortly afterward, the Jensen Papers were forgotten, then lost. Our new secretary found them this year on the floor of an old metal storage cabinet. Our past revived.
The Basic Choices for Writing Centers

The first document we read, after dusting off the covers, was an in-state report by the California State English Council, sent to us by Edward White, the principal author. The report is entitled "Equivalency Testing in College Freshman English: A Report and a Proposal." White, who overcame his "condition of happy ignorance about the entire area of testing in English" (2) in the course of putting together the document, makes an interesting point in his preface relevant to the development of writing centers, including our own. White notes a basic division in the profession at that time regarding the purpose of first-year English. On the one hand, taking a cue from Albert Kitzhaber, White noted that:

The view of English as "therapy," as filling its function by imparting correct spelling and other conventional forms of expression, is widely held outside of the profession and even by 48.9 percent of the English departments in the United States. (6)

and on the other hand,

Correct knowledge of formal English, valuable as it is for many purposes, is not all that is taught in our classes.... Our freshman English courses are more concerned with developing an awareness of the various levels of usage, which are appropriate to various situations, than in abstract notions of correctness; and we are far more interested in helping students develop and test ideas in writing than in maintaining the supposed purity of the tongue. (6)

Obviously, how a department chooses sides in the above "argument" will determine the character not only of its first-year composition courses, but also its writing center. Will the center be a place where students are tutored in grammar and usage and where their final drafts are patched up and edited? Or will it be a place where students go to find help and encouragement as they try to "develop and test ideas in writing"? The Jensen Papers reveal that, in 1972, universities around the country were developing tutorial services based on both of those conceptualizations.

Two of our fellow Pennsylvania institutions provide examples of how this argument over the function of English helped to shape the early development of writing centers. By fall of 1972, both Penn State University and Temple University had each established writing clinics. This in itself constitutes a progressive move by their respective English departments. However, Penn State's clinic was apparently therapeutic in function and bottom-up in its approach. It had been instituted for "low achievers" and "anyone with low placement scores" (Stewart 1); and the clinic's major purpose was to support the basic course (English 1), which was described in the syllabus as "rest[ing] on the assumption that the ability to write is best developed by organic stages: the less complex before the more complex, the smaller before the larger" (English 1,
Syllabus 1). That looks to us like the sub-skill theory of learning to write as opposed to the functional whole-language approach in which students learn by writing whole texts.

At Temple, the situation impressed us as being somewhat more progressive. Here, the writing center was part of a larger support service called English Language Enrichment Center (ELECT). ELECT was interdisciplinary, staffed by volunteer members of the English, Speech, and Psychology departments, all of whom had moved their offices to the enrichment center and did part of their teaching at ELECT. The writing center within ELECT was described as a large classroom open daily from 8:30 to 4:00 and staffed by one or two graduate assistants. One of their duties was to accommodate Temple’s English 1 students by posting five or six topics for the students’ mandatory weekly themes and then patiently waiting at their desks as students wrote and then sought conferences. It is interesting to note the incompleteness of the teaching process during this period at Temple. The first-year basic course emphasized writing and revision as opposed to exercise and drill; however, there didn’t seem to be any notion of student and tutor engaged in working through a writing process. In fact, we could find in the entire Jensen Papers only the vaguest descriptions of how one-to-one conferences were actually carried out. We can only imagine that tutorials at Penn State, Temple, and nearly everywhere else followed the Southern Illinois University model: “the student brings us a rough draft, and we go through it word for word” (Lawrence 1).

Writing Centers as Substitutes for Courses

Further complicating the scene were racial issues which loomed large in the background on some campuses. In a report on several interviews he undertook at the December 1972 MLA convention, Jensen describes a program administrator at Dartmouth worrying about the need for “both the town and the upper class white students . . . to come to grips with the presence of the minority students, especially the blacks” (Jensen 4). The interviews also revealed that the complex and admirable program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison included a tutorial program burdened by “undertones of racial problems, especially in the mixed tutoring assignments” (Jensen 4).

The issue of remedial courses was framed by two quite different concerns. The chair at U.C. Riverside, Peter Zoller, told Jensen that the Chicanos and Blacks “objected to Subject A [the remedial course], which they saw not as a way to gain writing competency but as a discriminatory procedure by the university.” A writing center, by contrast, offered a private setting for remediation.

While some universities were struggling to integrate significant numbers of underprepared minority students without injuring dignity, other schools seemed
almost oblivious to the enormous change that was taking place in the student constituency. The changes were not only in the mix of race and gender but also in raw numbers. In the early 1960s, about one-fourth of high school graduates went on to college; by 1975, one half of the graduating classes matriculated (Daniels 219). Nevertheless, Jensen learned in an interview with the chair at Ohio State that after 1960, "remedial' English wasn't offered" at Ohio State (Jensen 2). Instead of a course, informal help with papers was offered by volunteer English majors and by the Office of Minority Affairs. The Ohio State viewpoint saw remedial courses as unnecessary because of the high quality of students who had entered college in the sixties. This viewpoint remained at some institutions, including Dartmouth, where, according to Kitzhaber, the few weak students were handled through tutoring (31).

The Conservative Restoration

Our concern in looking back at the early 1970s is not to record everything relating to writing centers that can be learned about that period. What we want to get at is our own history, our own origins—the birth and parentage of our own department's writing center. For that institution was shaped and then, in our view, distorted by historical forces building throughout the 1970s.

On a national level, the period was charged with ideological wrangling on both the right and the left as a reaction to the liberal sixties. Let us state our bias immediately: we call ourselves liberals, progressives. In our tilt to the left, we agree with Michael Apple that interpretations of educational issues—especially those in English education—must be understood historically, and, therefore, must account for the class, race, and gender dynamics of the period (Apple ix) as well as the local accidents that so obviously affect us.

The conservative agenda evolved toward the close of the 1960s. Ira Shor marks 1969 as "the hinge" year (1). What followed was what Schor calls a "conservative restoration" that has tracked educational policy right into the 1990s.

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loss of important requirements, credit for remedial courses, grade inflation, and in general a lessening of the worth of academic degrees.

Conservatives of this era were pleased with the new careerist goals of students who no longer feared the military draft. Conservative educators were ready to usher in a training model of education along with testing to determine the proficiency of training (Apple ix). Also on the agenda, was a language standard reflective of an officially sanctioned common culture. Even English teachers, in some cases, were willing to ignore the professional linguist's wisdom about language variation and synchronic language structure in order to embrace Edwin Newman's uneducated hysteria about the impending "death of English" (Newman 1).

First of all, in the conservative restoration, standards had to be re-established. The way to do that was through a program of "back to the basics" with "accountability." In secondary schools, both the students and the teachers would be held accountable. On the college level, only the students had to prove themselves in course performance. The way to demonstrate accountability was through competence testing. In order for mass competence testing to be feasible and the results reliable, the testing had to be "objective." Subjective evaluations weren't dependable nor would they have fit conveniently into readable, succinct reports destined for outside overview (a feature of accountability).

Harvey Daniels in Famous Last Words: The American Language Crisis Reconsidered summons up for scrutiny and criticism an array of conservative statements in the popular press and in campus publications by academic and non-academic citizens alike. Yale University, often a source of conservative opinion, provides some fat targets. Daniels ridicules a particularly foolish guide to student writing by three members of the Yale English department. This pamphlet offers dire and contradictory warnings and "huge, sweeping rules delivered in a tone of smug irritation at its readers' ignorance" (247). The manual declares that "most poor writing results not from ignorance, but from carelessness" (qtd in Daniels 245), thereby putting the burden of progress entirely on the student. In this conservative view, good writing is a moral responsibility, poor writers are sinners, and teachers are the handbook-thumping defenders of the Mother Tongue.

Daniels' book is disturbing in the extent to which it reveals an underlying contempt for students in much of the restoration rhetoric. Daniels critiques at length an article published in the January 1976 Yale Alumni Magazine by A. Bartlett Giamatti shortly before Giamatti became president of Yale. Quoting and paraphrasing, Daniels begins by establishing the perspective on the student body which Giamatti will soon serve from the highest platform:

Giamatti's beginning assumption is that "today's college students... have lost touch with the language." They are the products, he argues, of the "anti-structures" of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These students are unable "to
listen to anyone else,” “to take direction,” “to multiply,” “to take the pressures of grading.” Many of them, in fact, “cannot cope with their work, their time, themselves.” (206)

But the conservative restoration would not put students “in touch with language” in any important new way. If anything, students became less interested in intellectualizing and more interested in job preparation. During the 1970s, a decade of conservative educational policies, it must have been disheartening for people like Giamatti to watch SAT scores plunge.

The Scientizing of English

Behaviorism also helped to forge the conservative agenda. Although mortally wounded by Chomsky as a theory of language some fifteen years earlier, in the 1970s behaviorism was still an important specialty in many university psychology departments. Beyond that legitimate domain, it seemed to offer a theoretical underpinning—a scientific one at that—for a “basics” curriculum and for a program of objective testing. In its strong version, behaviorism rejects the validity of assertions about that which cannot be directly observed, such as mental processes, and limits discussion to the “measurable.” Multiple-choice tests and error-counting measurement procedures provided the right “objective” tools for a “scientific” approach to the humanities.

As a consequence, many colleges in the 1970s, including our own state institutions in Pennsylvania, were required to rewrite their curricula in the form of behavioral objectives. Both conservative and liberal professors of English were turned off by the mechanical and ugly language; for example, “The student shall demonstrate an ability to understand basic concepts such as protagonist.” Conservatives expressed their linguistic chauvinism by dismissing educationist and social science language as mere jargon draped over common sense (Zoellner 131).

Robert Zoellner defended the general scientizing of the discipline by accusing English teachers of not being able to understand science, in particular in having “difficulty grasping the use in science of conceptual models to focus inquiry” (130). For him this meant the “animal-learning model” of Skinnerian behaviorism or stimulus-response-reinforcement; according to Zoellner, that version of behavior science allowed for flexible goals and emphasized teacher encouragement of promising behavior. The educationists, however, ignored Zoellner and proceeded with a more primitive stimulus-response version of behaviorism, one which called for highly specified pre-planned goals and activities followed by “mastery” tests.

As for understanding science, composition and linguistic researchers during the 1970s would use models to “focus inquiry” (for example, Garrett’s linguistic
model of sentence planning; see also Kinneavy's review, cited in our bibliography). Linguistic and rhetorical models of the type mentioned here were used to do science, that is, make predictions that could be tested. To our mind, the use of behaviorism to impose changes in English curricula did not constitute "science" or anything else of superior validity.

The Progressive Response

Simultaneous with the conservative restoration, many in English education, linguistics, rhetoric, and composition theory sponsored a progressive program. In May 1971, for example, Richard Worthen drafted a policy statement for the NCTE Common Engineering Curriculum. The statement reads in part:

The present very real and complex problems of adequate measurement and reasonable bases for holding teachers accountable for instruction hold a threat for the discipline of English, the threat of a narrowly defined, "measurable" curriculum and the specter of teachers defensively limiting themselves to the superficial aspects of literacy in language and literature. (qtd in Maloney ix, 1972)

In addition, James Squire in 1972 was denouncing what he called the "mission oriented," human engineering approach to English education with its performance targets, marshalling of available resources, and assessment or evaluation in terms of predetermined objectives. Squire's counter, in addition to insisting that any behavioral model was destined to fail, was an "open ended inquiry" pedagogy that encouraged creativity and critical thinking on the part of students.

The progressive rebuttal to the conservative restoration continued with the NCTE's declaration on "Students' Rights To Their Own Language." In no uncertain terms, this document rejected the standards and objectives of the conservative agenda. "Standard" English was declared a class-specific form of expression, and all dialectical manifestations of student language were summarily legitimatized.

Progressive pedagogical theories flowered between the cracks of the conservative pavement. Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers championed a self-directed, creative composing process, while Mina Shaughnessy located both student errors and teacher responses within the socio/economic politic of open admissions. Stephen Judy spelled out a progressive program in his "ABCs of Literacy," wherein he denounced conservative practices of drill-and-skill, behavioral objectives, and accountability, and called instead for a student-centered, interdisciplinary, and collaborative pedagogy.

In sharp contrast, then, to the urge to standardize and systematize is the view that education, in particular writing instruction, should be personal, a view expressed powerfully by Andrea Lunsford:
I believe that our insistent striving for objectivity has gone hand in hand with the demise of a truly collaborative learning model because such a model depends on measurement whose criteria are based not on national norms but on the performance of the teacher as "connoisseur" and the student as "apprentice" in a context of shared cultural values and standards. In many of our tests, the criteria for achievement are external to the teacher-student relationship and hence militate against it. Further, many tests especially suggest that we value writing not for making meaning or for finding our stance in regard to the crucial issues of our lives but merely for labeling things "right" or "wrong," for demonstrating something called "minimum competency." (8)

The Progressive Approach to Writing Centers: An Example

The Jensen Papers provide an extraordinary example of how a writing center can foster this intimate connoisseur-apprentice relationship. Ken Bruffee sent Jensen his first writing center manual, "A Handbook for Writing Tutors," consisting of a short introduction by Bruffee and several narrative accounts of the tutoring experiences of two graduate students. After defending the concept of peer tutoring in the introduction to his handbook for writing tutors, Bruffee explained that he "made up the rest of this handbook by drawing on live records of tutorial work done by . . . Brooklyn College students." He ends by saying, "I frankly don't know if this kind of 'handbook' will help you be a better tutor or not." We found the narratives moving and instructive.

One such narrative, the Patraka journal, develops not only the story of how one basic writer developed confidence and improved his writing. At the same time, it tells the story of how one graduate student tutor learned how to teach writing. Patraka didn't have access to the theory and experience available today, so she makes familiar tutoring mistakes with George, her client, but she has the insight to see her own shortcomings and learn from those errors. It is that continual learning-while-teaching that keeps the narrative complex and interesting. George is required to write responses to sophisticated readings. In a typical passage, Patraka is trying to get George to use his own language and ideas instead of relying on her voice and interpretations. In the process she discovers something about student ownership:

Also, I insisted that on any point which he disagreed to say so. He did this and we either compromised, or he finally understood what I meant. (Months later I realized the naivete of this statement: I was often overbearing and to the end George could not resist writing down my suggestions even though he disagreed because he was convinced that many of my words and phrases were better than his.) (6)
The picture of basic writers familiar to us from the work of Mina Shaughnessy and Sondra Perl is presaged in some of Patraka's journal descriptions of George:

I noticed the correlation between George's inability to write well and his lisping and hurried speech and poor, sloppy handwriting. That all reflects his lack of confidence, his inability to assert himself, and his desire to get things over as soon as possible because his fear of failure is so painful to him. (14)

By the end of the journal, she concludes that in teaching writing she "was dealing with psychological factors more than mechanics" (14).

Ironically, given Bruffee's diffidence about the usefulness of his writing center manual, it is now common for writing centers to follow his lead and include accounts of learning experiences of past tutors.

Unfortunately, the 1970s would eventually give birth to a back-to-the-basics movement in which the basics would be defined as the most mechanical and easily measurable components of writing. The call for accountability would lead many schools away from the insights of people like Vivian Patraka, who looked for the basics of writing not in the pages of a drillbook but in the personal history and the mind of her student.

Two Conservative Models of Writing Centers

Put aside for a moment Bruffee's "alternative context" model of a writing center.

The Jensen archives also describe a writing center which is conceived as part of a larger "systems approach" to English. A large-scale curricular framework in the early seventies, the "systems approach" sprung from business theory of the 1940s. One of the programs found in the Jensen Papers, that of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, attempted to introduce the systems approach into higher education, structuring its writing center to fit into the scheme.

Virginia Bahe from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UW-M) outlined in her "Writing Laboratory Progress Report" a "systems design" writing clinic which would emerge "from collaborative staff and student planning toward agreed upon objectives" (3). These preplanned objectives, we are told, would develop from a meticulously detailed "planning and implementation program" wherein "coordinated decisions, teamwork, and administrative support" would be paramount in establishing the writing clinic. Anything short of this massive effort, warned Bahe, would force the writing clinic to "sacrifice [the] standardization, economy, and efficiency inherent in the total systems approach" (4). Overall, the UW-M systems design would provide a "preplanned system of diagnosis, instruction, and evaluation." It was hoped that "beginning
teaching assistants might welcome a pre-planned program for their work in the writing center.

From these descriptions, it didn't seem like tutors were going to be set loose with students to forge long-term personal relationships in which learning evolved out of the personal needs and growing competence of both parties. On the contrary, like many early centers, the UW-M writing center was not primarily seen as a walk-in place but as part of a larger program in which diagnosis preceded treatment. The UW-M plan called for a "referral service for students needing individualized instruction in writing, spelling, and related reading skills," including "computer-assisted placement [and] diagnosis . . . based on actual writing and objective testing." (1)

Unfortunately, UW-M's systems approach to a writing laboratory failed to become a fully operational model (Bahe, "Brief History" 1). We suspect that from the beginning, the UW-M Writing Lab was besieged by what Leo Ruth identifies as endemic "systemsthink" problems (63). Primary among these problems is the system itself, the bureaucracy which, as though by fission, divides and continues to divide itself in a chain reaction of management policies and procedural operations, until having grown so unwieldy and inefficient, it collapses in upon itself.

From its beginnings in September 1971, the UW-M systems approach writing lab was plagued by "sizeable staff changes . . . and other management demands" (Bahe, "Brief History" 1). As with such approaches, focus, time, and resources were devoted to the system itself. In the end, Bahe's own sophisticated evaluation showed that the systems model writing lab was not effective:

Writing lab students performed as well as, but not significantly better than, students in regular sections according to statistical analyses of [McGraw-Hill Writing Test] results. Writing Lab pre/post gains, too, revealed no significant t-values. ("Brief History" 1)

Unfortunately for us at CUP, our own university provides a second example of a conservative model. The Jensen Papers and other sources such as the new flood of workbooks provided our department with a response to the new student that included a developmental course focusing on the sentence, a regular writing course centered on the paragraph and the five-paragraph-theme, and a writing center. In the late 1970s, a competence test component was added, largely to assure other departments who required first-year English that such courses would be strictly writing courses and would not "degenerate" into literature courses. Under the new program, a student who failed a multiple-choice competence test for any first-year course (including the research paper course) would have to be tutored in the writing center until ready to retake the test. The effect on the writing center was disastrous: it became essentially a drill-skill factory.
At our university by the late 1980s, extracurricular competence test training had come to so dominate the attention of the writing center that walk-in students with papers were often turned away because all staff on duty were tied up with test training sessions. You don't sink any lower.

The Professionalization of Our Writing Center

Our original early seventies facility at CUP, called the "Writing Clinic," was a cramped faculty office where professors and graduate students, attracted by tenant Ron Forsythe's inexhaustible supply of hard candy and coffee, congregated informally and without remuneration to tutor students. An in-house report describes a "crowded, dirty" room, a "bandbox," with a few "scrounged" desks and several dog-eared rhetorics (Forsythe, "Writing Clinic" 1).

Forsythe told us in an interview that the writing clinic at CUP was at first conceived of as an "informal faculty cadre" for one-to-one tutoring. At its inception in 1972, there was neither official university recognition nor support; Forsythe described operations as a "sort of bribe system," whereby faculty would exchange their expertise for a teaching load reduction.

Without a theoretical model, our own writing center's evolution from clinic to center seems to have developed in three distinct stages. Stage I (1972-1977) might be called The Age of Innocence. We believed that all we had to do to make a center work was to set one up. As English teachers and graduate students, we wrote better than the clients; the idea that there might be theoretical issues or technique behind teaching collaboratively through conferences never occurred to us. For example, when Murdick directed the clinic for several years in the mid-seventies, he saw his mission clearly: publicize the existence of the writing clinic so that students from all over campus would begin using it. Unfortunately, when students did start coming in large numbers, the untrained tutors could only snatch up student papers, uncap red pens, and wing it.

Stage II (1977-1988) in our evolution could be termed The Age of Conservatism. As indicated earlier, our approach during this period was remedial and test-oriented. The independence of the clinic was surrendered and gradually the attention of the tutors would be consumed by test preparation. Our own writing center report for 1980 states that the "clinic exist[ed]" to perform the "service [of] tutoring those who failed competency exams in English Language Skills (100), Composition I (101), and Composition II (102)" (Forsythe, "Writing Clinic" 4). Furthermore, according to Forsythe, this test-drill "service" made the "clinic an integral part of the English department's competency-based composition program" (“Writing Clinic” 4). We now had our own little systems approach going.

And we were on the right track as far as anyone knew. In a local newspaper article in August 1978, CUP's writing clinic was touted as a response to
Newsweek's "Why Johnny Can't Write" polemic. The newspaper article referred to "the nationwide decline in students' ability to communicate on paper" (Valley Independent 6). Our writing clinic was hailed as CUP's attempt to "combat" this headline-grabbing problem.

It seems clear that in our conservative stage, the CUP writing clinic's tutorial purpose was understood in terms of the "cult of accountability." There was no maliciousness in this. In fact, helping the department to hold students accountable to a pre-determined set of measurable grammar skills was the writing clinic's means of showing its "attitude of concern" for those underdeveloped souls who had "failed the competency exam" ("Writing Clinic" 4).

In the early 1980s, our writing clinic published its "tutoring process" in six meticulously detailed stages that cumulatively depict an institution ready to join the ranks of the conservative restoration in writing pedagogy. Here are the first three steps the clinic followed on its organized journey back to the basics: "(1) clinicians prepare a written analysis of the results of the student's competency exam to determine if his failure was caused by panic or ignorance; (2) notified by the department of his failure, the student goes to the clinic at the beginning of the semester to be tutored; (3) the written analysis and a series of diagnostic tests confirm the student's problems, and he is ready to be helped" ("Writing Clinic" 4).

The moment competence testing arrived in our department the writing clinic did an about-face, turning away from the student as a growing writer and toward a conception of the student as a failed copy editor and befuddled grammarian. For better or worse, the clinic achieved its goal: "no student, whether his deficiencies be profound or petty, who has been tutored has failed the retest " ("Writing Clinic" 4).

Our Age of Enlightenment (1988-present) had roots in the late 1970s in the form of a kind of nervousness, if not a sensitivity to winds of change. Forsythe noted that the clinic's major liability was the lack of a theoretical base to guide writing clinic tutorials. The staff were operating according to the only model they knew, a tutor-dominated, competency-based tutorial. Although they were operating successfully, helping all tutored students pass the English department competency test, Forsythe remarked that the staff felt frustrated and angry "towards a system that [had] filled their heads with New Criticism but not with solutions to the riddles of convoluted syntax" ("Writing Clinic" 5).

Our professionalization began sprouting in the early eighties when some of our faculty got interested in modern composition theory and began reading the journals, attending conferences, and even taking graduate courses. On the political side, during the eighties the enrollment increased to a point higher than ever, from under 3,000 in 1980 to over 6,500 in 1990. After a hiring freeze of almost 18 years, senior faculty began to retire in large numbers, and this, along with the rising enrollment, led to the hiring of new faculty, many of them either
composition, linguistics, or professional writing specialists who tended to know and favor modern theory and to oppose competence testing. After a lengthy and loud department battle, the tests were voted out of existence in 1989.

Included in this first wave of new teachers was a permanent, professional administrator for the writing center trained in rhetoric and linguistics. As a tenure-track member of the English department with full academic status and a long-term commitment, the new writing center coordinator was able to radically change the writing center and the program context within which it operated.

Long gone is the cubbyhole which Forsythe described as a “dirty termitary” that looked and smelled like a “pesthole” (“Writing Clinic" 6). In its place is a spacious, clean, carpeted, well-lighted, and thoroughly comfortable modern facility. Gone is the faithful staff whose dedication was no match for the tediousness of grammar drilling and copy editing. In their place is a crew of fourteen writing tutors who must go through a training program in composition theory and one-to-one collaborative tutoring; tutors whom we expect to become readers of composition journals; and most importantly, writers themselves who understand the importance of assuming a coaching role to the students they tutor. Gone is the formalized tutoring service that functioned as little more than a fix-it shop. In its place is a writing resource, collaborative, student-centered environment where experimentation within a process framework is encouraged.

Even in this Age of Enlightenment there still exists a conflict, both intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary, between those who continue to define our facility as a remedial, service-oriented clinic and those who view it as a multifaceted, theoretically based writing resource. For example, at a recent meeting of CUP’s Human Services Coordinating Council, some of our colleagues in Education and Psychology proposed a new cooperative effort in which they would use psychometric devices to diagnose student writing ills and then pass the patient on to our writing center for indicated treatment. But we are now too street-wise to be taken in by an antiquated “medical-remedial paradigm,” to use Mike Rose’s term (351). Writing problems are not mysterious neurological dysfunctions but integral to writing itself, to the high expectations we have for written products including those of beginners, and integral to writing’s enormous power and consequent difficulty for all of us.

Conclusion

What the Jensen Papers revealed to us about our own path to professionalism is that the mistakes we made and the turns we took were national, not local. In retrospect, with its cult of accountability, competence testing, systems approaches, and back-to-basics, the 1970s was a decade of gross misunderstand-
ings. However, it was also a time for solidifying progressive hypotheses into writing programs and writing centers. We also know that theoretical formalism, transmogrified into behavioral objectives and proficiency exams, has not quit our profession. Literacy is still largely defined, within both the educational and public sectors, as the skill to decode the surface structures of written text, and writing is often understood as copy editing prowess. The job of English language education is still often defined as teaching such skills through lectures and exercises. And from that perspective, the function of the writing center is to remediate in the most reductionist way those students who have failed to acquire presumed sub-skills.

If we have learned anything from the Jensen Papers and our own experiences, it is that writing centers are subject to the same social and political forces that affect all educational issues and decisions. Writing centers are not monasteries, not safe enclosures in which the spiritual work of tutoring and speculating about the “riddles of convoluted syntax” can proceed untouched by the vulgar discord of the academic world. We must recognize our vulnerability, our penetrability, and prepare to live politically if we are to continue to grow as progressive resources within secondary and higher education.

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