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Mark L. Waldo

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What Should the Relationship Between The Writing Center and Writing Program Be?

Mark L. Waldo

Recently our English Department search committee was interviewing a candidate for a position in rhetoric and composition. Prefacing his first question, a committee member pointed to me as Writing Center Director and then said to the candidate, “Maybe you can mediate between us. Mark says it’s not the Writing Center’s responsibility to teach grammar. I say it is; I’ve got better things to do than take up composition class time teaching it. Who is responsible for teaching grammar, the writing center or writing program?” At issue here is not the inappropriateness of his question given the context. Nor is it the evident ignorance of research suggested by the phrase “teaching grammar.” What I want to focus on, instead, is the relationship between center and program implied in his comments and question. He seems to view the writing center as subservient to the writing program—one doing the sentence-level repair, often through drill and practice, and the other doing the teaching. Such attitudes, commonplace in English departments, ill affect a potentially powerful union.

What should the relationship between the writing program and the writing center be? An immediate response might be shaped by the similarities between the two operations. Staffed by people who have in common a concern with improving student writing, the answer is that writing programs and centers should share an equal and complementary relationship. They should be linked philosophically, each grounded in a similar theoretical perspective from which their pedagogy stems. If the writing program’s approach is principally organic, then so too should the writing center’s be; if the program’s approach is mechanic, then so too should the center’s be. It would not be practical, for example, for the

center to draw its tutoring practice from organic principles, emphasizing inquiry and collaboration, prewriting strategies, revision and review of drafts, while the program draws its teaching practice from mechanic principles, featuring lectures and teacher-led discussions, study of models, imitation of patterns, and attention to mechanics (see Hillocks, “Presentational Mode,” “What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental Treatment Studies”). Attempts to marry the organic with the mechanic will be awkward at best.

Some rhetoricians believe it is not possible to join the two with any kind of success. Knoblauch and Brannon, for whom mechanicism characterizes the ancient rhetoric and organicism the modern, argue that “the shift from an ancient to a modern perspective has not been a matter of gradual and slight conceptual adjustment, modern rhetoric growing naturally, imperceptibly, out of its ancient earlier tradition. Instead, the two traditions are essentially opposed, representing a *disfunction* in intellectual history because they derive from two different and incompatible epistemologies, two irreconcilable views of the nature of knowledge and the functions of discourse” (78). Knoblauch and Brannon assert that the consequence to the composition classroom of mixing the organic and mechanic epistemologies is the development of “pseudoconcepts” (i.e., “an essentially modern regard for the process of writing is compromised by a classical mechanistic view of its supposed ‘parts’”) (80). Dividing such diverse perspectives between writing program and center, to say the least, undermines the effectiveness of each.

While a common theoretical perspective promotes an equal relationship between the two operations, teaching activities will be different, by their nature falling to one or the other. Teachers may work with entire classes on revision, for example, while tutors work individually with students. But the work itself should be similar, complementary. The composition classroom is not, in other words, a place where one focus of activity occurs, the writing center another. It very much undervalues the program or center to give either the “duty” of teaching mechanics and correctness or the task of preparing students to display “writing competence.” In fact, if those are the only, or even primary, duties of either operation, its existence and funding is not justified.

In addition to pedagogic philosophies, the writing center and writing program should share the same or complementary goals. Both want to produce the best independent student writers they can. Both want to advance critical thinking skills and show students how writing shapes learning. Both also want to prepare students to step into the academic and professional writing community. For this last goal the models again may be different. The writing program, for example, may offer a variety of writing assignments to students—problem-solution, dilemma, analysis, persuasion—which will prepare them to write in their courses across the curriculum and beyond. The writing center may provide writing consultants to the faculty in the sciences, business, arts and letters in

order to help them design assignments pertinent to their courses—assignments which, like those required of students through the writing program, improve both writing competence and critical thinking. The center, in addition, will offer tutoring to students from any course at any level. The writing program works with large numbers of students in class; the center works with students and faculty one on one. Though the models may be different, their goals should be complementary.

I see the ideal relationship between writing center and program, then, as almost symbiotic. These programs work in close association, each benefitting the other and both forwarding writing as a powerful tool for learning. A purposeful bonding, this type of relationship makes the program and center essential to the academic mission of the university, not peripheral to it.

Relationships are rarely ideal, however. And perhaps you might recognize some of the following characteristics as representative too often of the “real” relationship between centers and programs—characteristics reflected in my colleague’s remarks quoted earlier. The writing center becomes a subset of the writing program, a clinic to which freshman English instructors can send their least able writers; or more particularly, the center serves the basic writing component of the writing program, working on the sentence-level problems of underprepared student writers. I have seen writing centers which rely heavily on tear-out work sheets, the kind offering ten to twenty sentences with errors that students are supposed to correct: fragments, run-ons, comma splices. In many cases, those worksheets have been replaced with computer-aided instruction, worksheets on screens. But whatever the cover, the activity remains drill and practice. For more than two decades, we have known conclusively that isolating sentence-level work from the writing process has no effect for good on the quality of the writing. And yet it goes on, too often, in the writing center. Why?

Directors who allow workbook instruction into their centers do so for a variety of reasons: the rules for standard written English have historically been taught this way by English departments, so tradition plays a role. Writing centers are often underfunded, and workbooks or CAI, one-time purchases, tend to be cheaper than tutors. As Muriel Harris remarks in her article “Growing Pains: The Coming of Age of Writing Centers,” “In a frenzy to keep costs low by limiting staff, and to hand over some of the responsibility for learning to students, some of us rely on self-instruction books, tapes, video and slide programs, and whatever.” Perhaps center directors may not know the research concerning drill and practice or may ignore it, relying on the obvious evidence of “improvement” that objective testing gives to administrators.

Because of the tenuousness of their positions and their operations, center administrators may undertake activities they would not otherwise undertake. They may accept the charge to become the grammar garage for the writing program, to prepare students for competency exams, to drill underprepared and

ESL students in the conventions of standard written English. They may take on these activities in the hope that, through accomplishing them successfully, the center will find its niche, become essential to the writing program, English department, and even to the university. Adopting these roles generates at least two serious problems, however: 1) devoting a center to particular tasks, especially onerous tasks, rather than pursuing a broader, more diversified vision, limits potential and actually increases expendability. It is far easier, certainly, for budget cutters to target centers that deal with freshman writing at the sentence level than it is to target those that deal with writing at all levels throughout the academy. And 2) focusing on these roles trivializes the center's relationship with the writing program in much the same way that writing programs were (and are) trivialized by literature programs within English departments.

There are, in fact, some strikingly negative parallels between centers and writing programs, and writing programs and English departments when the centers are service appendages to the programs. Recall that literature teachers used to look down on composition teachers, believing their work to be drudgery, of little intellectual challenge and abundant toil. E. D. Hirsch describes the relationship this way: "It was . . . natural that our profession should divide itself into two classes—[an] antiutilitarian literary elite and an underpaid coolie class who labored in the fields of composition" (14). The writing program was the service side of the department; as such it could be staffed with temporary faculty who had no power within the departmental structure. Because of their humble status, they could be paid wages significantly lower than tenure track faculty. This type of relationship with an English department, perhaps to state the obvious, has led to very low morale among composition teachers.

Now consider the writing center when it is the service appendage of the writing program. If the center becomes the editing arm of the writing program, it may readily be viewed as taking care of problems beneath the concern of classroom composition teachers. The center, with its staff of grammar grunts, cares for the sentence-level disabled. Even to members of the writing program, the work lacks significance, treats symptoms. Note Maxine Hairston's characterization: "The writing labs . . . sprang up about ten years ago to give first aid to students who seemed unable to function within the traditional paradigm. Those labs are still with us, but they're still only giving first aid and treating symptoms" (82). Or Barbara Walvoord's observation, "If you are very short of time, if you think you are not skilled enough to deal with mechanical problems, or if you have a number of students with serious difficulties, you may wish to let the skills center carry the ball for mechanics and spend your time on other kinds of writing and learning problems" (63). Each of these people is an English teacher who should understand that a far better relationship is possible. But each bases her comments on observable data. The types of writing centers they refer to have existed and do exist. Still, the tone of condescension present in each remark is disturbing to those of us who know how good the relationship can be.

In large part problems with the relationship between center and program stem from the level of faculty hired to direct the center: often a person with a master's degree, perhaps a part-timer or lecturer in the writing program; a person who has no possibility of tenure and no research or service role in the department; a person who has little or no formal training in composition theory; in short, a person who hasn't much chance of directing the center as a professional equal to his or her peers. [1] This is not, of course, the person's fault but the fault of a system which has taken decades to recognize the complexities, demands, and importance of teaching writing. Uncertain even about the status of writing teachers, English departments remain largely ambivalent about these labs and their directors. Couldn't anybody with a Master's degree, some teaching experience, and a knowledge of grammar set up one of those places and run it? The problem is that writing teachers are too often the ones asking this question. Thus, amending Hirsch's equation, composition teachers become the elite while center staff become the coolies. Even the situation in which the person hired to direct the center is tenure track but answers to the writing director can potentially cause an imbalance. The question is whose vision for the center will prevail under such conditions?

In large part the problems stem from English departments and writing programs themselves. Stephen North observes,

The grammar and drill center, the fix-it shop, the first aid station—these are neither the vestiges of some paradigm left behind nor pedagogical aberrations that have been overlooked in the confusion of the “revolution” in the teaching of writing, but that will soon enough be set on the right path or done away with. They are, instead, the vital and authentic reflection of a way of thinking about writing and the teaching of writing that is alive and well and living in English departments everywhere.

North [SUNY Albany's Writing Center Director] is suggesting that English departments get from centers what they expect and have historically practiced themselves. That is, drilling students in standard written English was, and remains, a common way to “teach writing.” Even those who believe it is necessary, however, would largely agree that such teaching lacks challenge. So what should be done with it?

Many programs do as Barbara Walvoord has recommended and “let the skills center carry the ball.” But to do so trivializes the work of those in the “skills center,” a term which itself smacks jarringly of remediation, punishment, contempt. And the work itself is not necessary. Since drill in mechanics does not improve writing quality, to what end does a college or university fund a skills center? When the skills center manages the editing “part” of the writing process within the context of the student writing (clearly a more pertinent way to “teach grammar”), it still mixes organicism with mechanicism, presenting a compart-

mentalized view of writing to students. In any case, the skills center, the fix-it shop, the first aid station can hardly bring about the complementary relationship described earlier. What can be done to bring about such a relationship?

I base my response to this question on seven years' experience as a center director, first at Montana State University and now at the University of Nevada, Reno. In 1983, I left a tenure-track position at Ohio State University to take the position at Montana State. It was a move which shocked my colleagues at OSU, because their view of writing centers was colored by the center they had there: directed by a non-tenurable staff member, in fact a graduate assistant, and devoted to developmental English students. How, they wondered, could a person trained to teach and do research in composition theory take such a job?

The position at MSU had built-in safeguards. It was tenure track in the English Department, half in administration and half in teaching. The status of the directors of writing and the writing center was equal, each answering to the English Department Head. All of the principals—the Head, the Director of Writing, the Academic Vice President, and the Center Director—had a vision that extended beyond the “treatment” stage. Our center’s mission, we all agreed, should be twofold: first, to assist students in improving the quality of the academic writing they do for their courses, through tutoring all phases of the composing process; second, to consult with instructors who include (or want to include) writing assignments as part of their course requirements. The Center had to be the compositional heart of the institution; it had to show faculty the need for writing across disciplines, and then it had to meet the need through consultancy and tutoring.

From 1983 through 1988, the Center’s statistics tell the tale, at least in part, of its success. In AY 1983, when the Center opened, it recorded 5400 student visits from 100 different courses. In AY 1988, it recorded 9000 student visits from 500 different courses. Center writing consultants had, by AY 1988, worked directly with more than 300 of the 500 FTE faculty. The Policies and Planning Committee, initiated to determine which programs could be cut during MSU’s perpetual budget crises, judged the writing Center to be “critically important,” the only such judgment of a program out of hundreds it made at MSU. The Writing Center was vitally bound to the Writing Program, itself designed to prepare students for academic writing.

If there was a problem with Center relationships at MSU, it stemmed from the large role the Center had university-wide and its high visibility. It appeared to some within the English Department, by which the Center was funded, that the Writing Center received more attention from the University than the English Department. The Writing Center Director’s position at MSU offered a greater variety and possibility for creative action than did the position of the Director of Writing. Therefore, when I left, the Writing Director took my job.

At UNR the set of challenges is different. A strong, tenured staff trained in composition theory, for example, was present at MSU when the Center began its work. Though many fine lecturers teach the composition classes at UNR, none is tenured, and only one has theoretical background in composition. The groundwork for a significant cross-curricular writing project was already laid at MSU by a major two-year FIPSE grant. Several faculty were requiring writing as a result of the training they had received. And they were serving as consultants to their colleagues. No such groundwork exists at UNR. Certainly, many faculty require writing assignments in their classes at UNR, but there has never before been a coordinated cross-curricular effort here. The majority of UNR's faculty holds the predictable reservations about requiring writing in classes; they must be convinced of its value, if the program is to succeed, and then trained to design pertinent assignments and evaluate them quickly and fairly. Further, there is some entrenched classicism within the writing program, characterized by study of professional models, imitation of patterns, and some drill in grammar, which did not exist at MSU. But there also seems to be a healthy climate for change.

UNR's Writing Center has been established with a twofold goal in mind: tutoring students and consulting faculty. Instead of being linked by budget to the English Department, it is an independent unit under the Academic Vice President's office and within the College of Arts and Sciences. I am tenured at the associate level. It is one of the most ambitious writing center projects in the United States with start-up costs exceeding \$180,000 and a yearly budget of \$100,000.

The Writing Program Director at UNR has fostered the climate for change here and has embraced the programmatic shifts required to bring about a complementary relationship between Center and Program. The expectations are high: that the student population will receive an academic transfusion, becoming through writing more immediately and actively involved with their educations, and the faculty will become more engaged in their teaching. First semester statistics are encouraging: the Center recorded visits by 1660 students from seventy-nine different classes; our writing consultants worked with more than 100 faculty both individually and through workshops during the term. Particularly exciting to me is that much of our contact with students and faculty has been generated by positive word of mouth.

Like those at Montana State, the Center and Program at UNR are working together to advance the critical thinking and writing skills of an entire university student population. A comprehensive project of this scope requires the direct support of upper administrators, who see the marked advantages to students and faculty that its success can bring.

Notes

¹The following job advertisement in the January, 1990, issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* illustrates my point: "Writing Center Director. Twelve-month non-tenure track specialist position, renewable, beginning September 1990. Duties include hiring, training, scheduling, and supervising the tutors in the English Department Writing Center, administering and developing the computer program in the center, designing and supervising mini-classes, practice labs in the areas of reading and writing, and managing the budget. PhD preferred, MS required plus related experience in writing center administration, basic reading and writing instruction, and computer lab management." This description tells us something about the type of center this English Department wants, largely a "basic" one; and the type of person, largely a powerless one. Even so, this may not be a bad job, when viewed comparatively.

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Mark Waldo is Director of the Writing Center and Associate Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno. Prior to coming to UNR, he was for six years Director of the Writing Center at Montana State University. He has published articles in several journals and books, including *Rhetoric Review*, *Wordsworth Circle*, *Collegiate Microcomputer*, and *Teaching Writing in the Content Areas: College*.

