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Maintaining Chaos in The Writing Center: A Critical Perspective on Writing Center Dogma

by Irene Lurkis Clark

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of The Writing Center Journal, I am arguing in favor of maintaining chaos in the writing center. Now, of course, most readers of this journal are likely to be surprised at a position such as this, since writing centers are usually chaotic already—phones ringing, students coming in and out, computers clicking, everyone talking at once, constant commotion. I understand all that very well. My writing center is always chaotic too, and sometimes I long for peace and quiet or, at least, order. Why would anyone advocate maintaining chaos?

Everything, of course, may be reduced to a question of definition, and I began to think about what I meant by chaos and the importance of preserving chaos in the writing center when I read a statement written by Gary Olson in the introduction to his book, Writing Centers: Theory and Administration. Olson observes that “although writing centers have always been diverse in their pedagogies, philosophies and physical makeups, the writing center’s period of chaotic adolescence is nearly over. Center directors are slowly articulating common goals, objectives, and methodologies; and writing centers are beginning to take on a common form to evolve into a recognizable species” (vii). Olson views writing centers’ emergence from “chaotic adolescence” in a positive light, since he interprets it as an important step toward adulthood, that is, as a sign that writing centers are finally becoming part of the academic mainstream.

Now, although I share Olson’s interest in the enhanced status of writing centers, I am nevertheless a bit wary of the possibility that writing centers will soon take on a “common form” in the profession, a common form verging on dogma, and it is in response to this idea of a “common form” that I advocate the maintenance of chaos. When I think of the terms “common form” and “recognizable species” in the context of writing centers, I recall the preface to Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, which tells of a time when

the world was young and all about were truths and they were all beautiful. . . . And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them. . . . However, the moment one of the
people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried
to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he
embraced became a falsehood. (4-5)

What I would like to explore in this essay, then, is my concern that, whether
or not writing centers become an established part of the academic community
(and I don’t think any of us are opposed to this), we maintain and continue to
value some of the “chaos” of our early days so that the “truths” of our profession
do not become “grotesques.” In this context, I am using the term “chaos” to
mean a willingness to entertain multiple perspectives on critical issues, an
ability to tolerate contradictions and contraries, in short, not to become so
dogmatic, so set in our ways, so fossilized, so sure that we know how to do it
“right” that we stop growing and developing. Adolescence may indeed be a
troubled time of confusion and chaos. But it can also be a time of wonder and
curiosity, a time of openness and questioning of tradition, a time when
exploration can lead to growth, discovery, and change. If, as Olson claims,
writing centers are no longer in the confusion of their adolescence, then I would
hope that from those early days they will at least retain their energy, their
freshness of perspective, and their willingness to tolerate contradiction and
encourage diversity.

Judith Summerfield expresses a similar distrust of absolutes as applied to
writing centers. She points out that the term writing process has now become
formulaic and that even the term workshop approach has become “institution-
alized” and “reified” (6). She cites examples of classes that require that students
write a certain minimum number of drafts for each essay, and she advocates that
we must look back as well as forward, to continue to think about what writing
centers are all about so that we will not lose what has been effective. Summer-
field is concerned that we not make static a fluid act, and she warns against
complacency and stillness, which, by definition, denotes a lack of movement,
a hardening of thought.

Maintaining chaos, or fluidity, or flexibility, or openmindedness, whatever
one wishes to call it, means, as Peter Elbow phrases it in his well-known essay,
that we are able to “embrace contraries in the teaching process,” whether the
teaching occurs in the classroom or the writing center. In that essay, Elbow
points out that good teaching, and by extension good tutoring, seems a struggle
because it calls on skills or mentalities that are actually contrary to one another
and thus tend to interfere with one another. Elbow points out that, as writing
teachers, we have an obligation to students but we also have an obligation to
knowledge and society; in working with students, we have to be both supportive
and nurturing, yet tough and demanding as well. In extreme instances, though,
writing centers have shied away from embracing this seeming contradiction,
opting gladly for only one side—the more nurturing role. “We don’t have to
grade,” we sigh with relief. We are concerned with learning, not with evalu-
Writing center philosophy encourages us to work with students at their own rate so that we can help students become better writers. Thus, we assert that we don’t have to worry very much about whether or not a given draft is a better “paper.”

This assumption, that if we nurture and facilitate, students will ultimately be able to help themselves, is an attractive one. It puts us on the side of the “good guys,” not on the side of the Mr. Gradegrinds who look only to what is concrete, who insist on standards and grades and all the ugly paraphernalia of academia. However, the problem with easily embracing only one side of this pair of contraries, as Elbow emphasizes, is that it can so easily become facile, limiting possibilities for interacting with students in a variety of ways, thereby limiting our effectiveness. If we see ourselves only as the student’s buddy, we must overlook our own commitment to the concept of good writing. If we view writing centers as only nurturing, we have transformed nurture into dogma, thereby limiting our view of our students. Being supportive doesn’t mean that we have to lower our expectations that students will do the best they can. If we abandon our concept of excellence and if, in the interests of being nurturing, we praise what is not praiseworthy and accept what is not acceptable, we are doing our students a grave disservice, not to mention diminishing our own reputation within the academic community. And, after all, isn’t it possible that sometimes students might have to be uncomfortable in order to learn?

Resisting dogma and maintaining chaos means that we must retain our awareness that despite all our progress, we have not as yet discovered any magic formula about how it is best to work with student writers; moreover, we must also remember that the diversity of humanity makes it unlikely that such a formula even exists. We were all quite aware of the importance of understanding individual process when we abandoned the product approach of the last generation, when we discarded the basic-skills approach for a more holistic, collaborative effort. We in writing centers know better than anyone that tutoring, unlike classroom teaching, must deal with the individual student at a given moment, and we must guard against presuppositions unsustained by observation, which assume that all students are the same. The stereotypical writing center student cited in the literature is an underprivileged basic writer with a terrible case of writer’s block, the sort of student so poignantly described in Mike Rose’s wonderful book, Lives on the Boundary. And, indeed, writing centers do work with many students such as these. But all of us also know that not all students fit this stereotype. Some students do indeed need hand holding. But some need less. And some will continue to clutch at our fingers until we ourselves force them to let go.

Maintaining the chaos of adolescence will help us prevent our “truths” from becoming “grotesques.” In particular, we must examine with a critical perspective the established phrases which ring through our discipline like cereal
commercials, phrases such as “collaborative learning” or “appropriating the student’s text” which, through excessive and unreflective use, are in danger of becoming meaningless. In this context, I recall the musings of Kate, the main character in Doris Lessing’s The Summer Before Darky who reflects that “a good many of the things she thought (and said) had been taken down off a rack and put on, but that what she really felt was something else again” (15). The term “collaborative learning,” for example, is one which over the past fifteen years has received considerable professional attention, and yet as the phrase runs trippingly off our tongues, we can easily forget to question what the concept really means or recognize that many different styles of tutoring have taken shelter under its umbrella, in many instances without critical examination.

What do we really mean when we say to colleagues and friends that our writing centers foster the spirit of “collaborative learning?” A close examination of the concept reveals that, by definition, true collaboration can occur only when collaborators are part of the same discourse community. As I have noted elsewhere, true colleagues regularly “collaborate” by discussing their work with one another, assisting one another by suggesting sources, trading drafts, rephrasing and deleting sentences, even polishing style in one another’s drafts (Clark 1988). This type of what could be called “collegial” collaboration is motivated by the desire to offer additional perspectives that can assist the author in identifying the sort of conceptual blind spots that are unavoidable, even for entirely competent writers. It is constrained by respect for the author’s abilities as a writer and knowledge of the field, and it assumes that the author, not the collaborator, will be ultimately responsible for the evolving text.

None of us has any objection, I believe, to the sort of collaboration that I have just described, even when collaborators suggest an additional source, correct an error, or even rephrase a sentence or throw out an idea. But this sort of collaboration is usually not what we mean when we refer to collaborative learning in writing centers. Collaboration in writing centers is aimed at a situation in which the author is not a full-fledged member of a discourse community; in fact, its intention is to help the author attain that status. With that goal in mind, tutors are cautioned frequently against dominating not only the text but also the collaborative discussions about the text, and numerous writing center policies have been instituted to prevent such domination. From the little we know about learning, we know that students learn best when they discover methods and ideas for themselves, when they are active participants in the learning process, not passive recipients of information.

My concern, though, is that, with the best of intentions, many writing center people have taken these half-truths and turned them into “thou shalt nots” which are often accepted formulaically, without critical questioning or concern about when and to whom they should be applied. This attitude is exemplified in an issue of the Writing Lab Newsletter in which a writing center director
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discusses several precepts she adheres to in training her tutoring staff, precepts which are actually admonitions. A tutor should never “write any portion of the paper,” she says, “not even one phrase” (Edwards 8). What would happen, I wonder (if I start thinking like an adolescent) if the tutor actually did write one phrase? Would the plagiarism police suddenly appear, complete with uniforms and sirens? Another of her rules is that tutors should never “edit the paper for mechanical errors. This includes finding or labeling the spelling, punctuation, or grammar mistakes in a paper or dictating corrections.” I find these rules very strange, disturbingly dogmatic and absolutist. I see little justification for an ironclad rule that tutors should never label spelling, punctuation, or grammar mistakes, neither pedagogical nor ethical. I also have questions about another common admonition that tutors should never hold the pen. Surely, one would think, there might be one occasion in which it might be more reasonable for the tutor to actually write something on a student’s paper (maybe one phrase?), presuming, of course, that the pen was not red [1].

Of course, we all agree that most of our policies and assumptions, even in their absolute form, are created in the interest of student learning. As the learning theorist, Jerome Bruner, points out, “the tutor must direct his instruction in a fashion that eventually makes it possible for the student to take over the corrective function himself. Otherwise, the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent upon the perpetual presence of the tutor” (53).

However, as much as we all agree that students must ultimately become independent of their tutors, I urge that, in the interest of maintaining a freshness of perspective, we guard against absolutist policies and question how such independence can be achieved. Bruner states that the student must “eventually” take over the corrective function himself. But what does the word “eventually” mean? Perhaps during the early phases of the learning process, it might actually be beneficial for the tutor to assume a more active role. According to Vygotsky in his work on the relationship between development and learning in children, the most important learning occurs when teachers work with students at the “zone of proximal development,” which he defines as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by the independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86).

What this means in terms of writing center pedagogy is that in order for tutors to help students improve as writers, they should work on “functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow, but are currently in an embryonic state” (86). Such functions might well require more assistance from a tutor during the initial phase, but such input does not necessarily mean that the student is not learning how to perform the
task himself or would be incapable of performing a similar task at a later time. As Vygotsky asserts, "what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone" (85). However, the writing center absolute against tutors ever taking an active role in the conference overlooks the fact that tutoring situations vary and that it is important to assess each situation on an individual basis.

Related to the injunctions against too active a role for tutors is another term which is used frequently in composition circles: "appropriating the student’s text," another “thou shalt not” of our profession. Appropriating the student’s text, a definite “no-no,” occurs when the tutor, rather than the student, determines what the writing will be about and what form it will take. In its most blatant form, the tutor in essence tells the student what to write, transforming the text into something completely different from what the student intended. The text now belongs to the tutor, not to the student.

Now certainly, no one feels that such authoritarianism or paternalism is desirable, neither ethically, psychologically, nor pedagogically. But the term "appropriating the student’s text" in some instances has become another dogma, and tutors are apt to use it glibly, without thinking seriously about what it means or questioning its implications. In their thought-provoking article concerned with students’ right to their own texts, Brannon and Knoblauch, cautioning teachers against perceiving students’ texts in terms of some “ideal” text, state the following: “the teacher’s role, it is supposed, is to tell the writers how to do a better job than they could do alone, thereby in effect appropriating the writers’ texts” (158).

I think it is important to question whether or not simply perceiving the teacher’s role in this way or having a concept of what a coherent essay ought to be necessarily leads to such appropriation. I also question whether or not it is always undesirable for tutors to actively give students a clue that there are better ways of doing things. Should tutors always withhold information about other possible directions for a text for fear of appropriating the student’s text? Thinking about other learning situations, I imagine how frustrated I would be if I had a ski instructor who, instead of telling me or showing me what I was doing incorrectly, simply encouraged my efforts or asked me several open-ended questions designed to get me to figure things out for myself, engaging in the kind of guessing game we sometimes encourage our tutors to play. Ultimately, of course, students will have to make decisions on their own, but surely there are instances where it is not only more efficient but also more effective to tell students the answer or to show them how to do something.

It is important that we continue to ask questions because, if we do not and become entrenched in “thou shalt nots,” we close our minds to other possible directions for helping students to learn. One such direction, which has not
received adequate attention from writing centers, is the role played by imitation in fostering student learning. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development suggests that we should reevaluate how imitation can facilitate learning; yet, as Anne Gere points out, our culture is characterized by a predisposition against imitation which prevents us from viewing it as a pedagogical tool.

At different times in history, though, imitation was a respected teaching method—at certain times, the method of choice. Referring to the development of oratory, Ann Gere cites Isocrates' idea that the teacher "must in himself set such an example that the students who are molded by him and are able to imitate him will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm greater than that of others" (8); Gere also cites similar recommendations by Cicero and Quintillian, who recommends "paraphrase because of its challenge to achieve expression independent of the original" (Gere 8). This notion suggests that imitation has the potential of ultimately leading to creativity, since it enables the imitator to expand previous, perhaps ineffective models into something more effective which ultimately becomes his or her own.

Using imitation and modelling in the writing center is only possible, though, if we keep our eyes open to new (and old or at least different) instructional possibilities. Along these same lines, we in writing centers need to give serious thinking to the problem of plagiarism, about which writing center people seem to be particularly paranoid. One reason for this, as I have argued elsewhere, is that writing centers are particularly vulnerable to charges from other academic departments that we may be helping students too much. A number of our colleagues view the idea of individualized assistance in writing with great suspicion; they perceive writing center instruction as a blatant form of cheating. These political concerns are, unfortunately, a fact of university life, and each of us must deal with them as best befits our individual situation.

What we can do as a profession, though, in accord with keeping our adolescent chaos alive, is to examine some of the roots of our own paranoia about plagiarism, many of which stem from the humanities tradition which, as opposed to other disciplines, has always viewed writing as a solitary rather than a collaborative activity. The humanities tradition dictates that form and style, not simply content, are the essence of a text and that writers, and in particular student writers, ought to work alone. Thus, collaboration in any form is often regarded with mistrust. Writing centers, then, as part of the humanities tradition, are often unwilling to experiment with imitation and modelling as a pedagogical method—to show students how to develop examples, write introductions, or vary sentence structure, for example. They fear "appropriating the student's text" or, worse, being charged with plagiarism.

If we maintain an open perspective, though, then we can question how and where we acquired our own style in the first place. Surely none of us is under the impression that we actually "own" a particular phrase in the sense that we were
the ones who had originated it. Sometimes the suggestion of a phrase or two from someone else can be wonderfully instructive, particularly for a foreign student; often a timely suggestion of a phrase can result in the student’s adoption of that phrase as his or her own.

For us to have the freedom to experiment, though, we need to examine more thoughtfully the basis of our instinctive outrage at even the hint of an unacknowledged borrowed word. The mere hint that a student has either inadvertently or deliberately appropriated another’s words transforms us from caring, sympathetic supports into single-minded guardians of honor and truth. Do we feel personally insulted by the student’s attempt to deceive? Or do we object on pedagogical grounds that plagiarism prevents students from learning?

Some of us may recall Bernard Malamud’s novel A New Life, whose hero, Levin, comes from the east to a western institution called Cascadia College. In one particularly humorous incident, Levin has to deal with a suspected plagiarist, Albert Birdless, a “D” student who turns in an “A” paper. Encouraged by the composition director, Levin spends evening after evening in the library, looking for the source needed to trap the culprit:

He read with murderous intent, to ensnare and expunge Albert O. Birdless. Levin saw himself as a man-eating shark cleaving with the speed of a locomotive through a thick sea of words, Albert, a tricky fat eel hidden among them, only his boiling blue eyes visible through the alphabet soup. (164)

Levin never does find the source and is compared unfavorably to Avis Fliss, who is renowned for her ability to ensnare suspected plagiarists. Avis is described as follows:

[She] has a knack of going straight to the Readers Guide, looking over the titles of articles on the cribbed subject for a couple of years past or so, and just about right away putting her finger on the one she needs. Her last incident she had this student nailed dead to rights an hour and a half after she read his theme. We had him suspended by his dean and off the campus before five o’clock of the same day. (161)

We smile at these portraits, but I think our own attitudes are not that different; certainly most of us have not thought our position through in any coherent form. In a CCC presentation a few years ago, Barry Kroll raised some interesting questions about the traditional arguments against plagiarism, pointing out that the notion that plagiarism is counterproductive to learning is not always true. What would happen, Kroll asks,

if one comes to suspect that plagiarism (particularly the familiar case of copying a paragraph or so from a source) does not inevitably
damage learning—at least no more seriously than quoting the same passage would damage learning. In fact, from the view of consequences to oneself, there would seem to be no morally significant difference between quoting and copying without acknowledgement: neither is more or less likely to lead to creativity, to learning, or to independent thought. And what if one could show that copying a passage from a source sometimes leads to learning or improved writing? (5)

These are some questions we should be asking when we formulate our position on plagiarism. And we must continually remind ourselves that, despite a flurry of publication, ethical issues involving text production are still being decided and that the concept of text ownership has varied considerably over time. Lisa Ede points out that in the Middle Ages authors simply didn’t exist the way we conceive of them now: no distinction was made between the person who wrote a text and the person who copied it. Our study of Shakespeare will tell us that in the Elizabethan period only those playwrights who were also actors, and thus members of the company performing their work, could expect to receive any financial benefit other than a one-time benefit. With few exceptions, the actors, who were members of companies that functioned much like present-day cooperatives, owned the plays the company produced. Most plays, including the early plays of Shakespeare, appeared without an author’s name on it, and once a company purchased a play, it felt free to make any alterations the actors wished.

The history of authorship reveals that our modern concept of text ownership, on which our ethical views are based and which may be considered a form of “intellectual property rights” (Ede 8), has not always been so and could well change again. The invention of the printing press and the corresponding development of copyright laws did much to determine our current concept; in the nineteenth century, for instance, German intellectuals argued that “writers can no more claim their texts as permanent property, theirs for a lifetime, than a cabinet maker can expect to profit each time a chest that he has made is purchased” (Ede 9). Thus, the past shows us that the intense interconnection between writers and their writing which informs our current conception of authorship and plagiarism was not always so much a part of the culture, nor did this issue always evoke such moral outrage.

I can conceive of a social or professional community in which the product alone was important, in which the method of creating that product was of little concern. The benefits attained through such a product would be accorded to the entire community; for example, a successful sales letter would increase sales, but credit to the original writer would be irrelevant. We have such a relationship
actually in my own department, where all of us freely borrow chunks of information for differing purposes. When the chair of my department extracts a two-page history of our computer lab that I wrote and includes it in a report she is writing, I do not expect her to acknowledge me in a note. Given the rise of the computer and the information explosion, isn't it possible that writing instruction might also include teaching students how to use and evaluate information, not only to produce it with originality?

Of course, my raising of these possibilities does not mean that I am in favor of blatant plagiarism. And, certainly, I am not recommending that tutors seize students' papers and quickly rewrite them, even though one is sometimes tempted to do so. My concern here is that we in writing centers retain a questioning, open perspective on what have already become enshrined writing center commandments so that excessive prohibitions against certain forms of assistance do not become rigidly established, accepted without question.

Thus far, in my advocacy of maintaining a critical perspective on writing center dogma, I have focused on the necessity of questioning how students learn, of recognizing student diversity, of analyzing the catch phrases of our profession, and of retaining an openness toward past pedagogical methods and values. The final area I would like to address in this context is the importance of questioning the role of technology as a means of responding to student writing. There are now numerous computer programs on the market directed toward the teaching of writing, and writing center people often find themselves in the anomalous and sometimes frightening position of setting up computer labs and selecting software. But in the context of maintaining a critical perspective, my concern is that we not let our cultural infatuation with technology cloud our vision or blunt our insight. Though we may rejoice at the computers we install in our writing centers, we must not assume that they will provide easy answers or that students will be able to learn highly complex skills and processes from simple-minded, mechanical procedures. Above all, we must not hesitate to ask critical questions about what the computer can really do. The computer craze reminds me a bit of the children's story "The Emperor's New Clothes," in which everyone claims to see the Emperor's invisible clothes because otherwise they will be deemed stupid or unsuited for their jobs. Maintaining a critical perspective on computers in the writing center means that we not be afraid to mention it when we think that the Emperor is naked.

Now I must qualify that I myself am extremely enthusiastic about using the computer in the writing center and am, in fact, in charge of two computer labs. But when we put computers into the writing center, we must not assume that they will solve all our problems. In particular, it is important to keep in mind that recent research on the composing process has revealed that writing behaviors vary considerably according to individual writers and writing tasks. "Some writers plan visually, some mentally, some on paper; of those who use
paper, some use lists, some connected prose" (Sirc 194). And these behaviors may vary according to different genres and contexts. Some writers, in fact, engage in little or no revision. In selecting our computer technology, we must not be taken in with promises of miracles, like a farmer with a new chemical or a lady with a new face cream. In our desire for certainty, we must guard against grasping at the slightest success of this or that program, or system, forgetting for the moment that nothing in our human world, least of all writing, can be so simple.

Let us not forget that computer programs which provide textual analysis can only be as good as the person who interprets them, someone who can help the student understand their implications. And let us not fall into the trap of mistaking numerical count for thoughtful human response. In many instances, the response generated by the computer suggests that writing is an elaborate "board game, where we must get our prepositions down to the mystical number, eliminate as many 'to be' verbs as possible, [and] reduce the number of our nominalizations" (Sirc 198). Similarly, programs which highlight grammatical error may be considered another manifestation of the error hunt. As Sirc points out, checking for abstract words or prepositions is fine, as long as we don't lull ourselves into thinking that now we really know how to teach students about style.

Computer programs that stress prewriting procedures provide a particularly appropriate example of how our profession will quickly adopt a new method or technique in its desire for miracles and certainty. So quickly have such programs become accepted that in some instances teachers have begun to prescribe computerized invention schemes, regardless of individual composing styles. Sirc refers to invention heuristics, particularly those which are part of computer programs, as "the Valium of the writing profession—no matter what your writing program, they can help" (195).

Actually, in many instances, computer response programs represent an "unfortunate return to a pre-process paradigm, emphasizing form and surface correctness, at the possible expense of our student's own writing processes" (Sirc 197). Response programs that continually ask the user to enter more text, despite the competent writing that the student may already have done, suggests that we value quantity rather than quality. Moreover, an unquestioning reliance on machine-generated response seems directly antithetical to the individual, student-oriented approach to writing which characterized writing centers' "chaotic adolescence."

In our selection of computer programs, in our embracing of both theory and method, and in our creation of policy, we in writing centers must distinguish what we feel students and tutors might do to produce an effective text from what we feel they must do. Most importantly, we must be careful to maintain a critical perspective and continue to ask questions, to challenge and reevaluate, avoiding
dogma and absolutes. Writing centers are indeed and at long last attaining a level of respect within the academic community, but we must be careful that our gain in academic status is not counterbalanced by a loss of energy and quality.

As we emerge from adolescence, we must guard against too soon acquiring the complacency of middle age and keep in mind that all worthwhile endeavors still depend on the ability to "glory" in "dappled things," as Hopkins tells us, in "all things counter, original, spare, and strange." We in writing centers must maintain our chaotic adolescence so that we, as well as our students, can continue to learn.

Notes


Works Cited


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