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Early Writing Centers: Toward a History

Peter Carino

Since the inception of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* in 1977 and *The Writing Center Journal* three years later, documenting writing center history is not difficult. Articles in these journals enable writing center scholars to construct a reasonably detailed history back into the early 1970s, when open admissions initiatives precipitated the growth of writing centers. While this rich data certainly helps centers of today to locate themselves in relation to the past twenty years, little has been said about writing centers before that time. Though not nearly as numerous as today, centers (usually established under the name lab or clinic) did exist before 1970, and references to them dot historical texts in composition. Writing center discourse, however, has largely ignored early centers or has monolithically represented them as deficient. When they have been mentioned, they have been constructed as poor cousins of English departments, stereotypical "remedial fix-it shops" where an unenlightened staff administers current-traditional pedagogy to underprepared and poorly regarded students.

Witness Ray Wallace's delineation of the features of the writing "lab":

*funded by a single department, English in most cases
*where freshman come to get help
*where the focus is on error
*which is badly staffed
*which is not held in high esteem in the academy
*where "bad" people are sent (even remanded) (83)

From these elements, Wallace constructs a model of the past in an essay which champions the present and future need for building cross-curricular

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centers. Though some centers may have fit Wallace's model, his rendering of the past, rather than an informed attempt at history, becomes a straw man against which he can set his agenda for current writing centers—a rhetorical strategy that enables his essay to present a vision of progress.

Like Wallace, Andrea Lundsford uses a progressive model to account for writing center history, constructing centers in her now well-known schema of "storehouses" based in current-traditional pedagogy, "garrets" subscribing to a student-centered expressionism, or "Burkean parlors" where tutorials are seen as instances of the social construction of meaning. Here the early center is portrayed as a "storehouse" of grammar drills lacking the theoretical sophistication of the "Burkean parlor" Lunsford advocates.

Similarly, Christina Murphy, in tracing a progressive movement of writing centers toward "current educational theory" (part of her essay's title), posits a deficient past in relation to her picture of a more enlightened model of present centers: "In the 1940s and 50s, writing centers were established to address the instructional problems of weaker students by strengthening their writing and critical thinking skills . . ." (276). To be fair to Murphy, she also recognizes a liberal mission in early centers—"developing students' potentials and facilitating their intellectual growth"—but implies that this agenda was subsumed by the conservative demand for "the highest number of measurable results for the largest number of students in the shortest time frame" (277).

These constructions, all by notable commentators on writing centers, reflect an evolutionary history of centers often accepted uncritically by the writing center community. I do not mean to say that centers have not "progressed." Nor do I claim for centers of the past the theoretical sophistication that commentators such as Wallace, Lunsford, and Murphy find lacking. Rather, I believe that although we can, to some degree, trace an evolutionary history of writing centers, this history is not a neat march of progress from current-traditional gradgrindianism to theoretically sophisticated nurture. Early centers, as we can reconstruct them from historical texts, were a much more variegated and complex phenomenon than has been represented in writing center discourse. Thus, in this essay I will attempt to trace the evolution of writing centers to demonstrate how early centers conducted practice in ways which both deviate from and foreshadow writing center practice and theory today. I will begin with a diachronic look at centers as an evolving phenomenon before closing with a synchronic perspective comparing centers of the past and present on three issues: clientele, staffing, and institutional identity.

EVOLUTION: CONNECTIONS AND GAPS

Finding the first writing center, in some form that we would recognize in terms of centers today, is like any quest for origins: the further back we go,

the more we suspect antecedents beyond those we have discovered. Using documents published in early issues of *English Journal* and other places, however, we can gain some sense of how centers began to evolve early in this century, though we may not discover the first impulse engendering them.

Classroom Origins: The Laboratory Method

As Thomas Hemmeter and David Healy have demonstrated, writing centers today often like to define themselves as an alternative or even an opposition to the classroom. Nevertheless, it is likely that centers evolved from a classroom format known as the laboratory method. This format enabled intervention in the student's writing process through individual help from the instructor and peer editing groups, two methods shared by writing centers and classrooms today.

As early as 1904, Philo Buck, a St. Louis high school teacher, described such a classroom. Long before the birth of Kenneth Bruffee and decades prior to the Dartmouth Conference, Buck's students wrote together on topics of their own choosing while he himself spent time with each individually before having them read and critique one another's papers. Buck may have even coined the term "laboratory method," for the opening of his essay justifies the method by drawing analogies with already established laboratory work in the sciences, a move that subsequent commentators in the early part of the century imitated. Though Buck's method used class time, evidently he was aware of the value of one-to-one instruction and peer critique, techniques at the heart of writing center methodology today.

By the 1910s, it is evident that others were subscribing to the laboratory method. Defending composition instruction against those who were calling for its abolition, an editorial in the first issue of *English Journal* cites the efficacy of the laboratory method. The method continued to flourish, as is evident in Francis Ingold Walker's 1917 article describing a classroom at New Trier High School similar to Buck's but with two days a week set aside for laboratory work. A similar article by Frank W. Cady of Middlebury College two years earlier indicates that the laboratory method had been adopted in post-secondary instruction as well. It is difficult to tell how widespread the method was in either college or high schools, but evidently it was common enough by the end of the 1920s to become the subject of an empirical study for a Master's thesis by West Virginia high school teacher Warren Horner. Horner found that students in the experimental group made small gains in rhetorical and grammatical proficiency but did so in half the instruction time dedicated to a control group of students taught in a recitational format.

A Place of Its Own

By name and method we can see connections between the laboratory

classroom and the writing laboratory, but according to the literature surveyed, the writing lab was not more than a classroom approach until the 1930s, when the University of Minnesota and the State University of Iowa (now the University of Iowa) established separate facilities for laboratory instruction in 1934. Adah Grandy relates that the Minnesota lab was housed in the College of Science, Literature, and the Arts and consisted of a large well-lit room with writing tables and reference books, as well as a smaller anteroom where student and tutor could conduct individual consultations (372-3). Grandy also notes in passing that the General College at Minnesota had opened a writing lab a year or two before, but this lab is never described except in a passing remark that "the work carried on in that College is very different from that done in the College of Science, Literature, and the Arts" (372).

Grandy's comment here raises the possibility that the lab in the General College was seen as remedial while his facility served a broader clientele. This distancing of the College Lab from that of the General College is one symptom of larger forces at work in higher education in the 1930s—forces that may have contributed to the development of labs. By the 1930s, colleges and universities were beginning mass education initiatives. Although the masses, despite much egalitarian rhetoric, were still largely defined as white males, children of immigrants and first-generation students began attending state institutions in large numbers. As a result, public institutions in 1933-34 equaled private schools in enrollment for the first time and surpassed them by the end of the decade (Levine 191). In addition, because many of these students were considered underprepared, more schools began initiatives similar to Minnesota's General College. Couple this changing population with the influence of John Dewey's emphasis on pragmatic education designed for the individual student (highly influential by the 1930s), and the time was right for writing labs.

More locally, Grandy's posture of superiority likely stems from the Minnesota lab's ties to the classroom. Classes met in the lab one hour per week in lieu of an hour in the classroom, much like a science laboratory, thus instructing all students rather than only those who chose to come or who were sent for remediation. During this hour, the instructor, assisted by two or three graduate students, would work with students as they planned and wrote papers for the class, sometimes working in groups and sometimes in individual conferences in the anteroom. In contrast to Minnesota's course-bound lab, the lab at Iowa, as reported by Carrie Stanley, offered small-group and one-to-one instruction, on both a referral and voluntary basis, for remedial students and "very good students [who] might drop in to try to straighten out minor difficulties" (424). Stanley depicts an entity that we would recognize as a writing lab by most of today's standards.

It is important to note that the Iowa lab started as a one-to-one facility

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independent of the classroom (L. Kelly 4-5). Thus, it provided a competing format that eventually became the norm. For instance, the Minnesota lab began to disconnect itself from the classroom at least five years after its inception, as is indicated in an article by Dorothy Kelly about a high-school lab in Elkhart, Indiana. Citing Minnesota's lab as her model, Kelly portrays hers as a place not only used by classes but also open all day for various students.

Armed Forces English and The Communications Emphasis

By the 1940s, free-standing writing labs were a recognizable part of higher education, though it is difficult to know how widespread they were. However, it can be documented that the number of labs increased with the advent of Armed Forces English, on-campus programs for preparing officers for World War II. After the war, these programs developed a communications emphasis, a pedagogy integrating writing, speaking, reading, and listening skills (also the pedagogy that accounts for the word *communication* in the CCC organization and journal).

Three articles in *College English* in 1944 and 1945 describe the Armed Forces' ambitious program to provide young officers with the equivalent of two years of training in English in just two semesters. As George Wycoff of Purdue noted, the Army's demands placed a strain on English Departments to create an elaborate program for a large number (40 per class) of students of diverse abilities in a short period of time. In addition, the Army insisted that students would learn at their own pace, mastering the material they could cover rather than taking a course covering a prescribed amount of material. Such an approach was natural for the laboratory, both as a classroom technique and in a tutorial setting. With the techniques of the military program tested, it was not surprising, as Grant Redford of the University of Montana predicted, that many of them were adopted for peacetime education.

Growing out of the Armed Forces programs, the communications emphasis, as James Berlin has noted, enjoyed much influence in the late 1940s and persisted in some form well into the next decade. Writing labs or clinics were integral to this emphasis. While the Armed Forces programs were concerned with rapid individual mastery for the pragmatic purposes of the military, communications programs shifted the emphasis to social development and the affective domain. At the University of Denver, graduate-student clinicians, as they were called, worked individually with students, using the techniques of "Rogerian nondirective counseling" (Davidson and Sorenson 84). In addition, clinicians were expected to help students improve grades to promote self-esteem, assemble biographical data about the students to help them overcome their fears, and help those who were "poor in English largely through accident of environment or education"

(Davidson and Sorenson 85). This description differs little from what might be a component of the mission statement of many writing centers today. However, with so much emphasis on the affective domain, the Denver lab was criticized for engaging in amateur psychology. Samuel Middlebrook dubbed the program "English I in Cellophane" (140). Even Frederick Sorenson, one of the lab's founders, admitted retrospectively that "informed people could not possibly permit uninformed 'clinicians' to tamper with student lives, and, as it turned out, there was no program for training clinicians in the methods of teaching grammar and rhetoric, let alone how to analyze students" (325).

While the Denver lab, despite its overzealous attempts at counseling, looked somewhat like a writing center today, the communications rubric covered a variety of approaches. At Stephens College, the writing "clinic" was set up for "[t]he student who finds it very difficult to spell correctly or who makes gross errors in English usage. Here causes are determined, exercises under supervision are given, and practical applications to everyday writing are made" (Wikesell 145). This evidently current-traditional effort at Stephens points to the kind of unenlightened model often assumed of all early centers by current commentators. On the other hand, the Denver lab indicates that drill-and-skill pedagogy was not the sole method of the times.

Labs or Clinics? The CCCC Workshop Reports of the 1950s.

By 1950, although their identities were not clear, writing centers were beginning to establish themselves as part of writing programs. Robert Moore reports in 1950 that of the 55 of 120 institutions replying to a University of Illinois survey, 24 had writing labs or clinics, and 11 others were planning them. The shape they would take concerned the CCCC workshops on writing centers throughout the first half of the 1950s.

From the inception of CCC in 1950, four of the first six years of the organization's journal contain conference workshop reports on writing lab workshops. These reports begin to identify and debate issues identical and similar to those that have concerned centers in the last twenty-five years. What kind of place should the lab be? Whom should it serve? Who should work there? What kind of services should be provided? What form should tutorials take? As is the case today, these issues remained unresolved.

Curiously, after 1955 there is little discussion of writing labs and centers in professional journals. One would think that the post-Sputnik emphasis on American education would have spawned more in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, it may be that with linguistics promising to be the salvation of writing instruction at this time, writing centers were overshadowed as both a method and a subject for professional discourse. Nevertheless, in some form they must have persisted and developed, for eleven years after the last

CCCC report, a 1966 article by Dorothy Whitted reports on a remediation effort at Ohio Wesleyan based on tutorials. Despite the focus on a remedial population, Whitted's attitudes toward students begin to foreshadow those of writing centers today. The student is "not someone who fails to meet a mythical arbitrary standard of excellence, but is a non-member of an 'in' group with respect to communication in an academic context" (40).

Whitted's article brings us to the late 1960s, when open admissions initiatives began to proliferate and writing labs and centers along with them. This period is one we know, thanks to Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* and such writing center-specific articles as Judith Summerfield's "Writing Centers: A Long View" and William Yahner and William Murdick's "The Evolution of a Writing Center: 1972-1990."

DIACHRONIC VERSUS SYNCHRONIC HISTORIES

The diachronic history I have sketched of labs and clinics prior to the late 1960s remains hazy, full of gaps. While I would like to claim that it represents an evolutionary march of progress from Buck's early classroom attempts to the multipurpose centers developing after the 1960s, as Hayden White and other poststructuralist historicists have reminded us, such diachronic histories depend as much on the selection and arrangement of events as on the events themselves. While my brief sketch may enable us to conjecture that the idea of the writing center has origins in the classroom laboratory method, that the Minnesota and Iowa labs began the break from the classroom, that the Armed Forces English programs contributed to the growth of labs, that the GI Bill in the early fifties brought students into the academy who could benefit from labs, a more accurate picture requires a synchronic approach comparing how these early clinics and labs stand in relation to labs and centers today. Thus, I would now like to turn to an examination of three current writing center issues as they surface in texts on the clinics and labs of the past: clientele, staffing, and institutional identity.

Clientele: Who Comes In and What Do We Think of Them?

Today, writing centers proudly advertise themselves as places where all students are welcome and are treated, regardless of ability, as writers with something to say. Texts on early labs and clinics indicate that along with some damning attitudes, a supportive view of even underprepared students was evident as far back as the early part of this century and continued into the 1960s.

In his laboratory classroom of 1904, Buck denounces the stultifying topics of the textbooks, proposes that teachers allow students to write on topics of their own choosing, and argues that a teacher should "[s]peak with

authority, but also as one who knows the heart and feelings of those he has in his charge" (507). While in 1917 Francis Ingold Walker in one breath refers to his students as "dependents, defectives, and delinquents," he also recognizes them as individuals, castigating teachers who "wear themselves out in a vain attempt to make all pupils conform to one mold" (448).

Cady's description of the Middlebury College lab classroom in 1913 also focuses upon and shows respect for the individual student: "As all the work is individual we build on individual error, calling the student's attention only to errors which he himself makes" (125). Though the mention of error here may indicate a drill-and-skill approach, Cady also mentions posing rhetorical problems that "call for long-continued and detailed thinking and discussion" (125). Likewise, Grandy's account of the lab sections at Minnesota includes concern for such matters as style, organization, transitions, revision, and sentence variety, as well as grammatical matters. In addition, as a classroom extension, the laboratory approaches before 1940, in targeting all students for lab instruction, did not create stigmatized and privileged groups of those who attended the lab and those who did not. In short, the lab approach was viewed as something that could benefit all students, an attitude much akin to that promoted by writing centers today.

In the 1940s, as labs broke from the classroom, accounts of them continue to show respect for individual student abilities, with scornful rhetoric such as Ingold's comment on defectives and delinquents almost nonexistent. But ironically the break from the classroom also fostered the view of the lab as the venue of the inferior student. In the Armed Forces program, as aspiring officers in an era of patriotism, students, of course, would be respected. At the same time, however, the clinical emphasis in subsequent communications programs such as that at Denver began to create an aura of deficiency in students who needed to visit the clinicians. Samuel Middlebrook condemned the scientism of the Denver program as misguided condescension and psychological tampering through which "the milk of human contentment is produced under the care of watchful men in white" (140). Such comments indicate that though the communications emphasis called its facilities clinics and labs in an attempt at scientific rigor, these designations soon were appropriated by administration and instructors not working with the lab to stigmatize students as lab specimens. Even Stanley's lab at Iowa, which provided an early model of Rogerian non-directive tutoring in 1945, was officially designated by the administration at Iowa as a place "to provide instruction for students whose placement themes did not meet departmental standards" (L. Kelly 5).

By the 1950s the CCCC workshop reports indicate that a remedial stigma increasingly followed students into writing labs. One kind of lab discussed in the 1950 report is designated "as a sub-freshman English arrangement for entering Freshman who make a poor showing of the English

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placement test" (31). Simultaneously, the workshops concerned themselves with the possibility of labs serving all students and addressed such questions as how students should be referred to the lab: by instructors, by teachers campuswide, or by their own volition. These questions continue to occupy writing centers today but also concerned early proponents of writing centers.

Staffing: Who Works in Writing Centers and What Should They Know?

While there was much concern over who would use the lab, there was also much discussion about the qualifications and attitudes of those who worked there. The earliest attempts of the laboratory method in the classroom, of course, relied solely on the teacher. However, in accounts of such classrooms, the attempt by the teacher to abandon the role of traditional authority figure is evident. Buck in 1904 writes, "Come down to the same plane with your pupils and then you can help them" (307). Walker, despite his unkind rhetoric in describing students, condemns red ink and grading symbols and takes much pleasure when a student tells him, "'You aren't the dignified teacher that I used to think you were. You seem just like one of the boys, and I have learned to like English through the laboratory work'" (445). This sensitivity to individual students' needs and this willingness to abdicate some teacherly authority prefigure much that is valued in writing center tutors today.

Early writing centers, however, did not, according to the literature surveyed, use undergraduate peer tutors. Grandy's presentation of the lab at Minnesota in the 1930s and the discussions of the Denver lab in the 1940s mention the use of graduate students, though these tutors were usually working in concert with a faculty member. Nevertheless, it was not assumed that just any faculty member could work in the lab. Redford in 1944 describes teachers in the Armed Forces program at Montana training themselves "to set about developing a philosophy... and methods of teaching the skills involved in communication" (277). Moore in 1950 cites the need for special training and argues that "the more resourceful the [tutor] is in suggesting new approaches to old problems, the more quickly does self help become effective" (390). And the 1951 CCCC report asserts that no instructor should be assigned to the lab who is not trained and willing to do the work it requires.

In each of these examples, the tutor is defined as someone different from the classroom teacher, as someone with a particular perspective on working with students individually. Although the literature does not indicate how, or even if, tutors were trained, it does point to the need for a distinct set of professional competencies that accord the lab an institutional identity apart from the classroom.

Institutional Identity: What is a Writing Center?

Today institutional identity is a hot topic, as writing centers attempt to situate themselves in relation to the classroom, writing programs, and institutional cultures. For early centers, this concern was not nearly as pressing, but it begins to surface by the 1940s. In the 1930s Grandy's and Stanley's articles on the Minnesota and Iowa labs seem content to present them as part of the larger writing program and, because they served all students, are not concerned with the stigma of being perceived as remedial facilities. Their identity, rather, is vested in the difference between classroom and individual instruction. As Dorothy Kelly noted, the idea of her high-school lab, based on the Minnesota model, "is that of a workshop: informal, free, and yet serious" (662).

By 1950, however, Robert Moore begins to make a distinction between clinics, which he deems remedial facilities for diagnoses, and labs, which are there to help all students. This concern continues throughout the CCCC reports of the 1950s and prefigures Ray Wallace's 1991 distinction between labs and centers. In the same year that Moore was differentiating two kinds of facilities, the CCCC report identifies five, ranging from the " remedial laboratory for students who have been unusually neglected in their basic writing skills" to a lab open voluntarily "on a college-wide basis to all students from all levels" (31). Though workshop participants, like the writing center community today, were never able to agree on exactly what a lab should be, they concur in 1951 that it "should be what the classroom often is not—natural, realistic, and friendly" (18).

The concern with rejecting the stigma of remediation and with creating an identity separate from the classroom is a recurring motif throughout the CCCC workshops of the 1950s. With the implementation of the GI bill following World War II and the Korean conflict and increased numbers of underprepared students pursuing higher education, more remediation than ever before was needed, and labs were called upon to provide it. At the same time, labs were struggling for respectability. This scenario foreshadows the results of open admissions two decades later when labs and centers proliferated at the same time they were denigrated as havens for the remedial student. Thus, the identity struggles writing centers face today, though perhaps more complicated, have a long history.

CONCLUSION

There remains much we do not know about early writing centers and much that may be irrecoverable, but what we can recover indicates that early writing labs confronted many of the same issues centers do today. Though writing center discourse, following post-Dartmouth composition history, often constructs a neat progression from current-traditional rhetoric, to expressionism, to social construction in lab practice, it is wrong to assume

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that early writing labs were current-traditional dungeons where students were banished to do grammar drills while hiding in shame from their more able peers. While it is evident that drills were part of the methods of early centers, heuristic and global concerns were equally evident. Like centers today, these ancestors did not see themselves as providing only first-aid to the grammatically halt and lame. Indeed, it is likely that writing centers' struggle against being relegated to this role increased after the post-Dartmouth process movement when many instructors saw the center as a place to handle the grammar instruction while they taught process. Although the rhetoric regarding students in early writing center discourse at times seems misguided, even cruel, these facilities preached and practiced many of the same things current writing centers endorse.

Writing centers are fond of seeing themselves in metaphors of family—cozy homes with soft couches where when students go they must be taken in. If we frame early center history in this same sense of family, we may not be able to claim descent from nobility, but neither will we find that our ancestors need to be forgotten and ignored like some crazy old uncle locked in the attic.

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