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What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Our Metaphors: A Cultural Critique of Clinic, Lab, and Center

Peter Carino

My title evokes Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," a short story in which two couples talk and drink an afternoon away discussing various experiences and definitions of love, searching for the elusive signified that would fill the signifier and render the word and their lives meaningful. Ultimately, meaning eludes them, and the narrative appears to reach closure as they run out of the gin that has lubricated the conversation. But this closure is undone in the last line of the story when the first-person narrator hears everyone's heart beating and metaphorically identifies the sound as "the human noise we sat there making" (154).

The indeterminacy of Carver's story provides an apt metaphor for examining the ways we have attempted to define the writing center. Though we have not been drinking gin, the various attempts at definition in our literature can leave one dizzy. As Thomas Hemmeter argues, discourse on writing centers continually begins with gestures of self-definition: "It is as if each theorist must begin anew the process of awakening the slumbering writing center profession to the urgent need for self-creation" (36). In one sense, this is how it should be. From a post-structuralist perspective on language, we accept that definition is always already tenuous, for to define is to symbolize, to create metaphors, to be in language. Situated thus, one might arrive at a definition like that which Hemmeter constructs. Playing off Stephen North he writes, "The writing center is an idea—in language." Pushing a bit further, he concludes, "The writing center *is* our words, a linguistic phenomenon" (emphasis original, 44).

I do not advocate a naive return to an uncomplicated view of language, but to borrow a term from Stuart Hall, the "experiential 'thickness'" (58) we

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confront daily in writing centers may make us uneasy with Hemmeter's reduction of them to "a linguistic phenomenon," even though we may support the post-structural premises informing this claim. Any attempts to define centers, it seems to me, should recognize them as both a culture unto themselves and as an activity in relation with larger cultures: the writing program, the profession of English studies, the university, and the culture in general. I use *culture* here in two senses offered by Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution*. The first, the social notion of culture, is "a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values . . . in institutions and ordinary behavior" (41). I take this sense to express the ineluctable welter of experience that confronts us daily in our centers, the experience that makes our history. The second sense "is the 'documentary,' in which culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded" (41). I take the documentary sense to express the ways in which our language constructs our history.

Writing centers, then, are social as well as linguistic, social in the sense of the praxis that goes on there, linguistic in the sense that all of that praxis is mediated by language both as it occurs and in any attempts we make to document it. As language, our documentation, our discourse, is always already interpretive. Have we arrived back at Hemmeter's position that "the writing center is our words"? Yes and no. Yes, to the extent that we can think and theorize the center culturally only in words. No, if we read our language through the lens of Bahktinian dialogic that deconstructs the boundary between Williams' social and documentary senses of culture. As Bahktin writes:

The word, in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and personal language . . . but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own. (293-94)

Bahktin here recognizes that we construct reality in language, but this recognition also accounts for the material conditions and political intentions inscribed in our constructions. From this perspective I would like to examine three metaphors by which we call and have called ourselves: clinic, lab, and center. Though not a comprehensive list, these metaphors have been the most widely used in the roughly twenty years since the advent of open admissions and the subsequent proliferation of facilities, by whatever name, providing one-to-one instruction in writing.

Calling such a facility a clinic was not uncommon in the early 1970s and has its origins long before. The *OED*, aside from its medical definition of *clinic*, lists one sense, designated chiefly American, as “An institution, class, or conference, etc. for instruction in or the study of a particular subject; a seminar” (328). In two of the quotations used to exemplify this sense of *clinic*, the word is appropriated euphemistically by economists and business people to elevate their activities to the scientific status of medicine. However, the final quotation comes from the January, 1951, issue of *College English*: “A ‘composition clinic’ has been set up by the college of liberal arts in the department of English of Wayne University . . . Once the student is enrolled there, his writing is diagnosed and he is given what ever treatment he needs” (ellipsis original, 328). The notable difference here is that while economics and business use *clinic* to name a context for solving abstract problems, this last definition begins with an abstract problem—writing—but shifts focus to a human subject—the student who is “diagnosed and given treatment.” This sense of *clinic*, while garnering prestige for those who work there, degrades students by enclosing them in a metaphor of illness.

That this sense often persisted when facilities began to proliferate in the 1970s is not surprising when we consider that their growth is related to the advent and growth of open admissions policies. The cultural moment producing open admissions and writing centers is so thick that its outline would require volumes, but even a cursory examination of it reveals the complex sociopolitical forces surrounding the illness model implicit in the clinic metaphor.

Open admissions was not solely the result of a sudden humanitarian impulse by those in power. While in some quarters Johnsonian liberalism and the war on poverty likely contributed to the thinking of legislators and university officials, open admissions, I would argue, was as much the result of the struggles of the disenfranchised throughout the 1960s. As the civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements questioned the prevailing ideology, their material struggles in the streets entailed a dialogic struggle for language, with the name and notion of democracy at stake. My tracing here is, I admit, an oversimplification. Consider also the advantages to organized labor of having a sizable, largely blue-collar segment of baby boomers, now reaching employable age, entering colleges and universities rather than vying for positions in the work force. One could go on.

But why clinic? It is one thing to let the rabble into the palace; it is another to make them comfortable there. Examining the institutional responses to basic writers for whom clinics were designed, Mina Shaughnessy identifies a stage she calls “guarding the tower.” Writing in 1975 she states,

during this stage the teacher is in one way or another concentrating on protecting the academy (including himself) from the outsiders, those who do not seem to belong in the community of learners. The

grounds for exclusion are various. The mores of the times inhibit anyone's openly ascribing the exclusion to genetic inferiority, but a few teachers doubtless still hold to this view. (234-235)

Though focused on teachers, Shaughnessy's argument likely applied as well to a significant number of administrators who funded writing clinics. This is not to say that they consciously conspired to keep open admissions students in their places by adopting an illness metaphor to designate the place where these students could develop their writing. My point, rather, is that the intellectual and political climate, or to use Raymond Williams' term, the "structure of feeling" (48) of the times approximated that which Shaughnessy saw among her teaching colleagues.

Shaughnessy's second stage of response—"converting the natives"—also tells us much about the ideology operating in the clinic metaphor. In this stage, "Whether the truth is delivered in lectures or modules, cassettes or computers . . . the teacher's purpose is the same: to carry the technology of advanced literacy to the inhabitants of an underdeveloped country" (235). The colonial impulses Shaughnessy attributes to this response from teachers inform the pedagogical and ideological connotations of calling a center a clinic. Writing clinics were associated with drill and kill pedagogy, materially evident in file cabinets full of hundreds of worksheets, and theoretically underpinned by the residual influence of current-traditional rhetoric, with its emphasis on product, which, in turn, was underpinned by the objective notion of text prevailing in the largely New Critical bent of most English Departments. This pedagogy did not, however, consider that learning is a negotiation of new habits, values, expectations, turns of mind, strategies of representation, and the like. Ideologically, clinic pedagogy was informed by the belief that if we can only get them to talk and write like us, everything will be okay.

This position is evident in the sense of *clinic* as "an institution attached to a hospital or medical school at which patients received treatment free of cost or at reduced fees" (*OED*, 328). In this definition, we can see contending both the humanitarian impulse of offering help to students and the connotation of reduced circumstances for the facility itself and the students and staff working there. Fortunately, the metaphor of the clinic neither lasted long nor persisted—only one facility carried this designation in the *1984 Writing Lab Directory* and none in 1992 directory—but its residue touched and still touches our designations as labs and centers.

While the clinic metaphor contained both a misguided humanitarianism and a tacit reactionary politics, the metaphor of a writing *lab* constituted a powerful counter narrative, advancing a cultural ideology more akin to the ways we perceive ourselves today. Whether called clinics, labs, or centers, the development of facilities providing one-to-one writing instruction paralleled the paradigm shift in composition studies from the current-traditional

emphasis on product to the focus on writing as process, but this growth has particular bearing on the metaphor of a lab. By the 1970s the then new process approach, growing out of the 1967 Dartmouth conference, was influencing facilities for student writers. Even in some of the so-called clinics, directors and tutors were ignoring the worksheets and “diving in,” to use a third of Shaughnessy’s metaphors. In this response, the teacher makes “a decision to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (238). Judith Summerfield describes this period as a time of excitement, experiment, and collaboration: “One day we were working there alone, and the next day we were all engaged—instructor, student, administrator, tutor—in collaborative *doing*. Nothing seemed impossible . . . the maps had not yet been drawn” (4-5).

Despite this optimism, the metaphor of the lab came to signify a place as marginal as most clinics. Summerfield attributes this development to the triumph of post-sixties reactionary politics: “The *no* I kept hearing had to do with the times, with going back, with pulling back, with the Nixons of the time saying watch out for those who assemble. . . . Danger lurks when teachers gather in the halls or when they engage in talk . . .” (emphasis original, 9). This is a fine piece of rhetoric, but it is an oversimplification. Granted the Nixon administration carried an ideology repressive to the chaotic spirit of the times out of which open admissions was born and writing labs proliferated. However, we need a thicker description if we are to begin tracing the ideological and cultural pressures contending in the lab metaphor.

As Shaughnessy’s and Summerfield’s statements indicate, in the context of open admissions and the paradigm shift in composition, those working in labs probably perceived their efforts in the connotation of *lab* as a place to experiment, to pose questions, and to seek solutions to problems. For other constituencies, the lab metaphor took on different meanings. In the larger culture of the institution, its experimental connotation fit nicely with the experiment of open admissions. Also, there was a tradition of having labs for various disciplines—biology or physics labs, for example. This tradition must have been unconsciously bracing to those working in writing labs, but it would soon contribute to their marginalization.

For what probably was a limited number of writing programs, the metaphor of the lab as experiment offered a way of organizing themselves in the paradigm shift by coordinating lab and classroom instruction and by using the lab for research. But probably for most writing programs, excited but still anxious about the paradigm shift, the lab became the place to do the dirty work of grammar that would free classroom teachers to concentrate on the new process pedagogy. This was not a conspiracy but a culturally specific reading of the metaphor; that is, in colleges and universities labs used by undergraduates are primarily course supplements. And likely some lab personnel, to a greater or lesser degree, bought into this interpretation. As

Lester Faigley has written, “words carry with them the places where they have been” (535).

Already seen as supplements to writing courses, the designation writing *lab* suffered pejoration because students went to the lab only because they wanted to or because instructors in the regular first-year composition course singled them out for remediation. Also, they went there to be *tutored* (a term beyond the scope of this paper but carefully examined by Lex Runciman). Required lab work, which would have put writing labs at least on par with science labs, was only for remedial courses. In other words, to grasp principles of physics or biology, a student needed a lab, but classroom instruction was sufficient to teach students to write unless they were basic writers, an already marginalized group in need of remediation. We can thus trace a double-bind organization in the lab metaphor. Not to require all students in all writing courses to work in the lab was to deny that the kind of instruction it offered is integral to learning to write. To require the lab of only basic writers was to infuse the metaphor with connotations of punishment meted out to those who dared to be ungrammatical.

This pejoration of the metaphor seems to have a certain logic. Certainly, millions of people have become accomplished writers without working in the institutional entity we call a writing lab. However, this logic breaks down if we consider that few have learned to write well without ever having done the things writers do in writing labs: talking with another about writing, discussing risks, making and recovering from false starts—in short, collaborating. One might consider, for instance, Ezra Pound’s work with T.S. Eliot on *The Wasteland* or Max Perkins’ correspondence with F. Scott Fitzgerald as great moments in peer tutoring. Unfortunately, as we know, *lab* as in writing lab came to connote a marginal place where the marginal student attends to the teacher’s marginal symbols on grammar errors. In such a relation, we see the beginnings of the binary split Thomas Hemmeter traces whereby the classroom is privileged and the lab subordinated.

One might imagine an alternate history in which writing programs and writing labs integrated themselves to form a pedagogy by which all students in all writing courses spent time in both classroom and lab, with the lab as a place where students worked on the same things they worked on in class but differently. In most cases, this alternate history did not occur because, among other reasons, knowledge about collaborative learning was neither as plentiful nor as widespread as it is today. But in a limited sense it did occur because lab personnel refused to see themselves as grammar grinds. However, these efforts went on covertly, the lab folk reading the lab metaphor one way, the writing program reading it another. Thus, the lab, both as signifier and signified, was the site of conflicting pedagogies, ideologies, and intentions that persist today, though increasingly in less pronounced forms as a result of the work on collaborative learning.

Still larger forces than writing program/writing lab skirmishes contributed to the pejoration of *lab*. First, the post-war economy of the late 1970s was a time of economic recession. With staggering inflation and U.S. industrial and economic power declining in world markets, federal and state governments collected and allocated less funding for higher education. Add to the recession the resulting unemployment rates, which often drove the unemployed to school, and one can argue that even had university administrations, writing programs, and writing labs been in accord, it is unlikely that the funding would have been available to fulfill the most optimistic vision of the lab metaphor. With neither funding nor agreement on what labs should be, they were allocated the dowdy facilities often misguidedly romanticized in writing lab literature.

These digs sometimes seemed appropriate to those in English Departments because anyone who had studied a literature specialty but could not find a job could be suspected of deficiencies, despite a glutted market of Ph.D.s (itself a condition of multiple sociohistorical forces). That these people were willing to teach remedial composition, or even worse work in writing labs, often without promise of tenure, placed them on the academic margins. This tale of woe has been told too many times. In the worst cases, directors in this situation saw the position as a way to get a foot in the door of academe and were content to leave students to work on drill exercises, audio cassettes, or computer terminals while they themselves worked to publish in their literature specialties in hopes of either earning teaching assignments in literature or moving on to other institutions. In contrast, many others made writing labs their specialty, writing and researching in the field, working to establish writing lab publications and organizations, and building labs that might begin to fill their version of the metaphor.

This cultural sketch of the 1970s, a thumbnail history of the forces resulting in marginalization, applies to writing centers whether we call them clinics, labs, or centers, but I think it has more bearing on the designation *lab*. The idea of experimentation and innovation, multiple possibility and productive chaos, which informed the metaphor for those who chose to call their enterprises labs persists today as many of them have largely succeeded in maintaining this sense in the praxis of their labs as microcultures. For this reason, I believe the lab metaphor has not gone the way of the clinic metaphor. Still, for those who read the metaphor pejoratively, it is a short step to making jokes about students being dissected in the writing lab or tutors creating Frankenstein monsters.

The historical and cultural contexts contained in the lab metaphor at once parallel and vary from those contained in the notion of a writing center. The writing center metaphor likely has connotative affinities with such compounds as convention center or community center, with *center* defined as “the main area for a particular activity or interest, or the like” (*OED*, 1036).

This definition evokes the communal aspect of the center as a microculture in which camaraderie replaces the competitive atmosphere of the classroom. But as with the lab metaphor, other academic cultures had their own readings, seeing the metaphor as a euphemism for clinic or lab. We see this notion at work when *center* is used to form such compounds as English Skills Center, Basic Skills Center, or even Writing Skills Center, for *skills*, as Christina Murphy points out, connotes “a mechanistic model of parts being put together to make a whole” (277). In contrast, yoked simply with *writing*, *center* forms a bold and audacious metaphor aspiring to powerful definitions as in “the center of a circle, of revolution, of centripetal attraction; and connected uses” (*OED*, 1035). In this broad sense, for writers of the 1920s, Paris was a writing center.

Aspiring to this sense on campus is to move toward empowerment, not only by claiming to be central to all writers but also through such activities as the training of teaching assistants, faculty workshops for writing across the curriculum, credit courses, grammar hotlines, and tutoring for standardized tests such as the NTE and GRE. Increasing both the profile and prestige of the writing center, these efforts aspire, in Stephen North’s words, to “make writing centers the centers of consciousness about writing on campus, a kind of physical locus for the ideas and ideals of college or university or high school commitment to writing” (446). While certainly facilities called labs may hold and fulfill similar aspirations, the center metaphor encompasses them.

But this sense of the metaphor carries the dangers of assimilation as well as the potential for empowerment as it further imbricates writing centers in university culture, defining them beyond the nurturing communities they often see themselves as. For some, this is reason for trepidation. North, though supporting expansion, argues that writing centers must be valued “on their own terms, as places whose primary responsibility, whose only reason for being, is to talk to writers” (446). He worries that broader services make centers like “some marginal ballplayer . . . doing whatever it takes to stay on the team” (446). Summerfield expresses her astonishment and suspicion at the plush facilities of some of today’s writing centers (9), implying that they are allowing themselves to be co-opted by the powers that be. Warnock and Warnock have argued that to some degree “it is probably a mistake for centers to seek integration into the established institution” (22). While the Warnocks do not advocate a lack of involvement, they advise that maintaining a certain sense of marginality will enable centers to retain a necessary “critical consciousness” (22).

Maintaining critical consciousness is indeed necessary. As we enter into alliances in the macroculture of the institution, we should examine them carefully. For instance, in some institutions the writing center’s role in writing across the curriculum often translates into grammar across the curriculum, leaving us back at square one, clinics by another name. Likewise,

in preparing students for standardized tests, such as the PPST or NTE, we risk assimilation if we do so uncritically.

Equally important, as Irene Lurkis Clarke has argued, we must maintain critical consciousness about ourselves. Reports by Diana George, Karen Rodis, and Lea Masiello and Malcolm Hayward all tell us prejudices toward and misconceptions about writing centers still exist. Even without this documented history, we need only cite examples in job advertisements for directors to know that in many quarters centers are still perceived as remedial fix-it shops run by the underpaid who cannot find jobs elsewhere. These prejudices and misconceptions hurt, especially since they have persisted for a long time.

One response is to draw angrily inward, to buy into the metaphor of the center as enclosed, to set up a we/they binary in which those not affiliated with writing centers are vilified and martyrdom becomes a dogma by which we comfort and elevate ourselves by rationalizing that we accept these conditions because we are so dedicated to and believe so strongly in what we do. When we feel this way, we withdraw into the microculture of the center, taking solace in the spirit of community we enjoy in working closely with our tutors and the students frequenting the center. Situated thus, we emphasize our differences, alienating ourselves and others.

This perspective leads to what Hemmeter has identified as “a discourse articulated in dualities” (37) opposing the center and the classroom. One could expand these dualities to oppose center and writing program, center and institution. This binary logic has often reified administration as a Dickensian chancery, vilified classroom teachers as current-traditionalist Gradgrinds, but sanctified writing center folk as kind, liberal, nurturing, and theoretically hip advocates of the poor, oppressed student.

Granted these characterizations may sometimes hold true, but probably more often they do not. Masiello and Hayward report, for instance, that between 1984 and 1987 at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, teachers’ perceptions of the writing center increasingly matched those of center personnel. In “Talking to the Boss,” Diana George informs us that “Department chairs are much more interested in the workings of writing centers than we think they are” (38).

I am not advocating that we forget our heritage on the margins. But while remembering our marginalization, we should avoid romanticizing tutoring on torn couches in paint-peeled rooms. As Gary Waller writes,

in order to speak meaningfully to and within a dominant discourse, we must be inserted within it instead of trying to create an alternative outside. Deliberately choosing to be marginalized is a kind of masochism, the root of martyrdom. . . . Discursive structures do change, but they do so from within a given state of affairs. (11)

Like Waller, I would argue that only from the inside can we define our own metaphors to make what others talk about when they talk about writing centers and our talk about them one and the same.

This goal, however, will always remain elusive, and though to pursue it is to continually empower ourselves, to achieve it would be to arrive at definition, a comfortable but naive position. As Muriel Harris reminds us, “the idea of a generic writing center makes us uneasy because it is a truism of this field that writing centers tend to differ from one another because they have evolved within different kinds of institutions and different writing programs and therefore serve different needs” (15). Here Harris recognizes the cultural situatedness of particular centers. And though I have attempted to place our defining metaphors in historical contexts, I recognize the illusory elements in diachronic approaches to history. Culture and history are synchronous. Put concretely, for a writing center at one school it may be 1991; for a center at another it may be 1970. As Stuart Hall argues,

In serious, critical intellectual work, there are no “absolute beginnings” and few unbroken continuities. Neither the endless unwinding of “tradition,” so beloved on the History of Ideas, nor the absolutism of “epistemological rupture,” punctuating Thought into its “false” and “correct” parts . . . will do. What we find, instead, is an untidy but characteristic unevenness of development. (57)

Though Hall is writing of culture in total, his comments apply equally to our attempts to define writing centers. From this perspective, our attempts at definition, though constantly necessary, are always already doomed to fail. This thought, however, should not be depressing but invigorating, for the notion of definition, a word etymologically rooted in *finish* and *finite* smacks of closure, of completion, of death, while the “human noise” we make in our centers and in writing center discourse is clearly a vital sign of life.

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42 *The Writing Center Journal*

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