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## Of Writing Centers, Centeredness, and Centrism

*Richard Leahy*

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At conferences and in published writing I have come across phrases like “When our writing lab became a center . . . .” It is quite clear that the authors mean their centers have matured, “come of age” in Muriel Harris’ phrase (See Harris; Addison and Wilson). I can’t help being a little disturbed by this belittling of *lab* and extolling of *center* as the better word, when I consider how bland and meaningless the word “center” has become on so many college campuses. At Boise State University, I can count twenty “centers” without even looking in the directory, from the Quick Copy Center at one end of campus to the Outdoor Rental Center at the other. I’ve recently begun to wonder if we ever should have changed from a “lab” to a “center.” Was there any meaning in the term “center” that was useful to us?

The more I thought, the more I became interested in two forms of the word “center”: centeredness and centrism. The first, to me, suggests some of the best things a writing center can be in its sense of purpose and community. The second suggests a few problems that writing centers may be heading for, in its suggestions of monopoly and self-importance. I don’t mean to use either term as any kind of talisman; they are just handy ways of focusing the two main concerns I want to express about writing centers as they seem to be developing.

“Centeredness” I’m afraid sounds fuzzy and New Age, but by it I mean a sense of purpose and community, of knowing “who you are.” Centeredness is an important issue in these days of continuing “success” of writing centers, if success is measured by how large they grow. They grow, of course, in response to demand. A recent article by Joan Mullin in the *Writing Lab Newsletter* reports on a general survey of writing centers she and her staff

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conducted. The replies to the survey seem to indicate that the majority of writing centers are working hard to acquire more funding, more staff, more space, more computers, in order to handle the growing demand for their services (11-12). This very growth, however, can be the principal danger to the condition of centeredness I'm talking about. At the risk of going against much of what we writing-center folks believe in, I feel we should question how much growth we want to encourage. How much can we grow and change and still retain our sense of community and purpose?

At BSU we have had our share of growth; our numbers of clients and visits have climbed steadily. Our staff, which for several years hovered around twelve to fourteen writing assistants, recently mushroomed to 20. When I've talked with other directors I gather that 20 WA's working an average of 10 hours a week each is fairly typical or a bit high for an institution of 8000 full-time and 5000 part-time students. With two to five on duty at a time, they are busy most of the 55 hours a week we are open. If you look at the raw numbers of clients we serve, now about 750 a semester, the growth from year to year is fairly impressive, but if you consider the percentage of our clientele to the total student body, it isn't so impressive—only about six percent. Still, I have the sense that this is about where we should stop, that if we grow much more we will begin to lose more than we gain. And so, by consequence, will our clients.

The main reason we've about reached our limit is that twenty writing assistants, to me, is a lot of people to keep track of. A friend of mine who has worked with up to 25 has told me that 20 is about the optimum, and I'm finding out the truth of that for myself. Knowing how each of them is doing, listening to their tapes and conferring with them about their tutoring, and just spending a few minutes with each of them now and then to make small talk takes time. So I am continually astonished when I see other writing centers with far larger staffs. I recently visited one with 50 tutors, each working just a few hours a week. I have talked with directors who staff 100 to 150. At their schools, all secondary-education English majors are required to work in the writing center. Many large universities require the same of their graduate English students before they go into the classroom as TAs. These programs, by the accounts I hear from people who describe them to me, seem to function smoothly, but I don't understand how. I did hear one director with one of these huge staffs admit that there were many things she'd like to teach her tutors, but it was impossible to reach them all, or even most of them.

It seems to me that a large staff not only makes quality very difficult to maintain, no matter how efficient the initial training; it also works against community, which for me is an essential ingredient. Maybe I'm being short-sighted, old-fashioned, or too INFP (introverted-intuitive-feeling-perceiving) on the Myers-Briggs scale for my own good as an administrator. But I worry when writing assistants go through a whole semester without getting

to know each other. Some of my writing assistants have said in the past that the one thing they like best about working in the writing center, besides the pleasure of tutoring, is the feeling of family and teamwork. They have said that our staff members, at their best, pull together to offer mutual support and pool their knowledge. As the staff has grown, I've been most concerned to preserve that feeling as the key to the quality of service we provide. I try to foster a community of people who love writing and like to share their writing with each other, who know something about each other's interests, expertise, and tutoring styles.

Community must also exist between writing assistants and clients, as Judith Summerfield points out. Summerfield's idea of the writing center as workshop requires a "recognition of the social nature of language. A genuine workshop," she writes, "is one that builds a community of writers, readers, listeners, talkers, thinkers, who are encouraged to understand how they write as individuals, but equally important, as members of a community" (6). For a writing center to work as a true workshop, one in which everyone is free to develop his or her own best writing processes, there must be this sense of community. It is also too easy for the writing center staff to develop an us-and-them mentality, "us" being the writing assistants and "them" being the clients. I see it starting to happen sometimes in my own center, and I have to work to combat it. Still, for Summerfield's "genuine workshop" to thrive among writing assistants and clients, the writing center must start by building community within the staff. If the staff have a sense of community with each other, they will feel more inclined to welcome their clients into the community and share what they have learned about the centeredness of a writing center.

I attempt to translate that ideal into action by recruiting writing assistants carefully, not by putting out a general call for applicants but by asking faculty to nominate students they feel are excellent writers and good at working with other students—people who strike their teachers as the "right type." We hold a one-day crash training course just before the fall semester begins and weekly staff meetings throughout the school year. The main purpose, aside from training, is to get the writing assistants working with each other, so that they know each other's main strengths and interests, and they know when to call on each other as resources.

Our method of recruiting assures us that we have a staff of skilled, knowledgeable writers who can have confidence in each other. The writing centers that seem to function happily with very large staffs have, I suppose, developed different ways of knowing who they are. More power to them, but that is not how my staff sees itself. Does that also tend to limit how much our writing center can grow? Of course it does. At this point our space cannot hold many more staff members anyway, but some day if we move to larger quarters or miraculously receive a lot more funding, I expect to be very careful about how, or how much, we expand.

I mention sense of purpose as an essential aspect of centeredness. Purpose is hard to talk about apart from community; I suspect it may *be* community as Summerfield describes it. Several years ago the graduate assistant working with me was quite unhappy with the center. Granted that the unhappiness came partly from some personal demons, she had several specific complaints about the center, along with a general one that we lacked a “mission.” I did not understand what she meant at the time, but looking back now, I think I do. That was a peculiar semester. I’d been away on sabbatical and was met by a new crop of tutors (as we called them then) I hadn’t had a part in hiring. On top of that, we suspended the weekly staff meetings for reasons of scheduling I won’t bother you with. It was in some ways an exciting semester, because we implemented several new ideas. But it was also stressful, because we had to deal with the lack of community brought on by the hiatus in meetings and some tutors who really weren’t qualified. The following semester we managed to return to regular meetings and replace the unqualified tutors with some who were far better. The graduate assistant was much happier that semester. She’d intuitively known that community is purpose, or “mission,” something I have only understood now by writing about it.

Even more important to me with regard to centeredness, is my sense of “who” I am as director. I keep going back to Muriel Harris’ description from her 1982 article on the “ideal writing lab.”

In the ideal writing lab, the director is not off somewhere in a quiet office but in the lab tutoring along with the rest of his staff. Without that day-to-day awareness of what is involved in tutoring or what students need help with, a director is in danger of distancing himself from the reality of the writing lab’s work. And without a daily sense of what is needed, the director is less likely to keep moving the lab forward. When not tutoring, the director looks slightly harried with too much to do because of his commitment to responding to the needs of both students and faculty . . . (7-8)

In the hundreds of thousands (millions?) of words written about writing centers since 1982, not much has been said that’s more important. I’m painfully aware of the ways I fall short of Harris’ description. I suppose my situation approaches the ideal in one way, that I am not, in Harris’ words, “off somewhere in a quiet office” (Harris 7). My office opens directly onto the writing center, so when I’m there I get a fairly constant stream of problems and questions. But I feel just as isolated from the center, sometimes, as if my office were across campus. When I’m in my office I’m not “in” the writing center, tutoring, but consulting with my own students, talking on the phone, reading papers, preparing for class, writing memos and committee reports.

I feel it’s very important for the director to wear the hat of a writing assistant for at least a little while every week. I rarely find that much time.

When I do manage to do a bit of tutoring (usually to fill in when everyone else is busy), I find it not only very satisfying, but also very helpful when it comes to sharing tutoring experiences in our staff meetings. I have made unbelievable mileage in the meetings out of the handful of hours I spend tutoring each semester.

It seems to me the important thing department chairs, deans, and academic vice presidents need to understand (here I'm shamelessly generalizing) is that the writing center director is, or should be, a different kind of administrator from, say, the director of writing or the department chair. The work of the department chair and the director of writing is more purely administrative than that of the writing center director. They hire, nurture, guide, and evaluate the teachers working in their purview and — in the ideal sense of administration — keep the way smooth for the faculty to do their work of teaching. Writing center directors do the same, in their own way. But an important part of the writing center director's job is also, as Harris points out so vividly, to be immersed in the writing center's daily work. One of my colleagues, who has served as both acting Director of Writing and Acting Writing Center Director, tells me she experienced exactly this difference between the two jobs.

I probably do always look "slightly harried," in Harris' words, but not so much because of my "commitment to responding to the needs of both students and faculty." More often, it's because I'm watching the time before a class, a committee meeting, or an appointment that has nothing to do with the writing center.

In my last evaluation, my department chair told me I was doing a "great job" running the writing center. I told her I didn't feel I was doing as good a job as I would like, since I was not able to spend enough time in the writing center itself. She replied that the fact it was running so well meant I was doing well at organizing things and training the writing assistants to run the place on their own. I was flattered, and I like to think she's right. But I still don't feel I'm doing my job 100%, because too much of the time when I'm in the writing center I'm breezing in and out, not sitting down to tutor or listen to what's going on. At least I make a point to plunk down on the couch with a cup of coffee about once a day and engage in conversation with whoever's free to talk. These are good moments. It's at these relaxed times that the writing assistants express their deeper concerns and their better ideas—more so than in our formal weekly meetings. These are moments of centeredness.

So if I'm stretched too thin, why not hire an assistant director? One of these years I may push for that (the way the wind is blowing at the moment, I'd lose my graduate assistant as a tradeoff, so the gain would be slight). But that means establishing another hierarchical level, and that too has its dangers. I can illustrate what I mean by quoting one respondent to Joan Mullin's survey, who wrote

More and more, my work seems to involve administration, sitting on committees, task forces, etc. It makes staying in touch with the basic issues of tutoring much harder. I think that long-term writing center directors . . . need to anticipate this result and plan for it by making sure there is a second person around who really knows the ropes. (13)

This alarms me, because it sounds as if the assistant director will end up being the real leader of the writing center; the director will be that much further removed from the action. If there's to be an assistant director, the two directors ought to share a wide range of administrative duties and not let a rigid hierarchy develop. It seems to me that, just as a writing center shouldn't grow so big that it loses the senses of community, it shouldn't grow so administratively remote or top-heavy that the director loses one-to-one contact with its staff and its clients—loses membership in the community. It's important to preserve the centeredness of the director.

What I'm saying is that anything a writing center does in the way of growth, once it reaches a certain size, has to be considered as a tradeoff. Even tenure-track status for the director is a tradeoff. Getting tenure-track faculty status for the director is one of the prime recommendations on the Position Statement on Professional Concerns of Writing Center Directors (Simpson 37). I say Amen. But the tradeoff is that a tenure-track professor ends up with a heavy load of committee assignments, advisees, graduate projects, and so forth—not much of it directly related to the writing center. There also may be, as there is in my department, a teaching load of two courses a semester, no matter what extra duties the professor takes on. Don't get me wrong; I love teaching—I don't always enjoy it, but I always love it—and wouldn't have my workload any other way. But being a tenure-track professor is a somewhat mixed blessing. It is good for the director's job status and the prestige of the center, but if we're not careful it can become one more rivulet contributing to the erosion of centeredness.

As I turn now from centeredness to centrism, I turn from our sense of who we are as a unit to who we are as part of the university.

By centrism I'm referring to the attitude, which I hear explicitly and implicitly at conferences and in our professional literature, that the writing center should be the center of all writing on campus—particularly in the area of writing across the curriculum, but also in tutoring. This is similar to what Louise Z. Smith means when she writes of the “centripetal” nature of the writing center (3-4), but with a difference. Whereas Smith warns of an authority struggle between the writing center and the faculty, I am more concerned that the writing center will feel too “responsible” for everything going on, especially in writing across the curriculum, too worried that some faculty are going to do it “wrong.” The result is not necessarily an authority struggle; it can be an internal struggle as the writing center strives to be all things to everyone using writing on campus.

If you think of all the different disciplines represented on any campus, with the enormous variation in what constitutes “good writing” in each discipline, all the differences in genre, organization, modes of thinking, support and development, style, and so forth, then you can see it’s the rare writing center that can field a staff capable of dealing knowledgeably with all those differences. Sue Hubbuch does make a persuasive case for the “ignorant tutor” who challenges the writer to know and make clear what he or she is talking about (27). Our experience generally supports this model. But sometimes the barriers of genre are higher than the ignorant tutor can surmount. Take the example of history writing, which in most ways is fairly close to the kind of writing valued in English. In English classes we value writing that “gets to the point,” so the first paragraph propels the thesis on its way to development. History papers differ in that they usually start with a review of the reading done on the subject, then move on to an introduction explaining the writer’s chosen theme to the reader, before getting to the main thesis and development (Benjamin 53). There is potential for major misunderstanding even between two such closely related fields as history and English.

Differences in language can be just as troublesome as differences in organization. One of our writing assistants had to be corrected while giving a presentation in a marketing class when she criticized the frequent use of the word *appears* in a sample marketing report. She said *appears* makes the writing seem tentative and lacking in conviction. The professor interrupted her to explain that the report had to be written in a tentative style, because the marketing consultant could get in trouble with a client by implying that something was definite if it later turned out to be untrue. This was a minor incident, easily fixed, but it made me think about the assumptions we writing center people were taking into other disciplines. Few writing centers are in a position to tell the rest of the campus what to do with all aspects of writing. There are some disciplines, math for instance, where much of the writing takes on forms that we in the English department don’t usually think of as writing.

Other writers before this have posted similar cautions. Two recent articles in *The Writing Center Journal*, one by Diana George and Nancy Grimm and the other, which I’ve already mentioned, by Louise Z. Smith, caution that writing centers can get themselves in difficulty by seeing themselves too much as the center of writing-across-the-curriculum efforts. They should collaborate with other campus departments and agencies, but they should not try to gather all writing authority to themselves (Smith 4) or take on the role of lone crusaders (George and Grimm 65). Smith calls it “decentralizing” the writing center (6). I don’t mean to dampen the enthusiasm of any writing center directors who look on WAC as new worlds to conquer, but these cautions are sensible. I still remember watching a group of writing center folks file out of a conference session on WAC. One young woman caught my eye, just because in her fervor she had to catch somebody’s



eye, and said with ferocious intensity, “We’re going to make writing teachers out of these people!” The “worlds to conquer” attitude is really out there.

I have some question about whether writing center people should get themselves much involved in presenting workshops in various non-English classes. It is a poor substitute for professors leading their own students through the processes of writing assignments. It isn’t really known how much effect classroom visits by writing center personnel have on the quality of student writing. But there *is* evidence that when professors guide their own students carefully through the writing processes, substantial improvement takes place (see Walvoord and McCarthy). The professors know how their students’ writing should be informed by the nature of knowledge in their disciplines. An in-class workshop from the writing center could do a lot of good if there has been some careful coordination and if the professor has given some guidance ahead of time. In most of the in-class workshops we have done, I’ve gotten a different impression. It seems to me the professors have assumed that the 20 to 50 minutes they turn over to us is all that needs to be said about how to approach the assignment. I fear the message has been conveyed that the writing assignment is just another hoop to jump through, better handled by those writing people, not an integral part of learning how to think and write in the discipline. (At the same time, I recognize the publicity value of classroom visits; we go armed with our sales pitch and stacks of brochures.)

On my campus, our departments of history, sociology, communication, anthropology, geology, and teacher education, and at least individual faculty in chemistry, music, and math—among others I may not be aware of—take their students’ writing skills very seriously, and they take upon themselves the responsibility for their students’ writing. This doesn’t mean they haven’t used the writing center’s resources; in one way or another most of them have. Some of their faculty call us for feedback on their writing assignments. An increasing number of their students come to the writing center for consultation on their drafts—with copies of the assignment and criteria in hand. But these departments are essentially seeing to their students’ writing on their own, through special courses and other means.

Nor do we claim any corner on the tutoring of writing. Student Special Services, which is our largest source of funding at 80 hours’ wages a week, also supervises its own small crew of writing tutors. As a modest return for the financial support, we screen and certify writing-tutor applicants for their program. There are four different programs, including ours, that train and use writing tutors. We are sometimes called on by the others as a resource, but aside from this limited contact, we have little to do with them.

Nor do we feel we should. On the contrary, we are thankful not to be the center of every bit of writing consultation that takes place on our campus. Every writing center finds its niche in the intellectual life of a campus in its own way. When it came to WAC, we found ours in a monthly 2500-word

broadside we write and distribute to all the faculty. At first we called it a newsletter, until we realized it was something different from that. It covers a variety of topics having to do with both student and faculty writing, everything from clustering and “lowering your standards” to “the documentation jungle.” Through the sheer persistence of sending the thing to every faculty mailbox eight times a year, we have acquired a large and loyal following in virtually every department on campus. This has been our way of promoting WAC, working from within, reaching faculty directly rather than through the formal structure of a WAC program.

The broadside or newsletter approach is not for every writing center, because meeting monthly deadlines with 2500-word articles, plus all that’s involved in production and distribution, isn’t within everyone’s resources. Some campuses, too, may not be suited to this approach. It works for us, though, and it provides the bonus of getting the writing center plenty of cheap publicity and credibility with the faculty. A broadside is one example of alternate ways a writing center can be an important resource and source of energy for writing on campus without expending a lot of personnel and time conducting workshops in classes and other outreach activities. Another is the one proposed by Susan Dinitz and Diane Howe, in which writing center staff help classes across the disciplines by guiding peer-group critiques of drafts (49-51). Another is the program at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in which a corps of special WAC tutors are trained in their own twelve-week program (Wallace 45-46).

The two issues I have discussed, centeredness and centrism, are at the heart of the question, “Who are we?” To my mind, a writing center should not lose its sense of community, and the director should try hard not to lose his or her close contact with every staff member and with clients, and the people who work in the center should not worry—indeed, they should be glad—if the writing center isn’t the center of writing on campus; they are fulfilling their mission better if the center sees itself not as the sole source of authority and knowledge about writing, but as part of a network of people and services on campus that value and nurture writing.

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