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Eric H. Hobson

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Maintaining Our Balance: Walking the Tightrope of Competing Epistemologies¹

Eric H. Hobson

Writing center people prefer to use words like “teaching” instead of “pedagogy”; “tutoring,” not “individualized instructional session”; “what works,” rather than “effective educative strategies.” This simple diction is one feature of our linguistic practice we have celebrated across the writing center community. However, behind this facade of pragmatism, of action over theory, we have been actively involved in debates concerning the epistemologies to which we as a community should pledge our allegiance and on which we should build our instruction. We have been involved because, as James Berlin reminds us in *Rhetoric and Reality*, “every rhetorical system is based on epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the rules governing the discovery and communication of the known” (4). While the academy has argued vehemently about ways of knowing, with factions taking stands under such banners as structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, pragmatism, neo-pragmatism, post-modernism, we too have been involved in much the same inquiry.

Unlike the majority of the academic community, however, the writing center community debates questions of epistemology without making a production of it; often, we do so without being too aware of the nature or implications of our theoretical stance. For instance, I was not drawn into this investigation because I have an unfulfilled love for philosophical argument. Rather, this investigation began when I was forced to think through the differences between the tenets on which a writing lab and a writing center are

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founded. These differences have been a source of a popular argument across the writing center community for at least the past ten years. Much of the discussion of differences in emphasis and founding assumptions between labs and centers refers to shifts in the paradigms on which writing instruction was based—from product to process (to use one trite description); from Current Traditional Rhetoric to the Process Approach (to use another worn moniker).

At the heart of the debate lies a struggle between competing ways of knowing the world, between competing epistemologies. For example, throughout the lab/center debate, positivist assumptions about knowledge as both quantifiable and prescribable—observable in writing labs with remediation in grammar instruction as their primary activity—have been discredited to a large extent by more epistemic assumptions about knowledge as a communal phenomenon of agreement.

As competing epistemologies fight for positions of dominance in writing center theory and practice, I wish to warn of the problems that arise in any theory or practice that tells us it is the TRUE epistemological foundation for writing centers: be it writing center as remediation center; writing center as center for individualized instruction; or, writing center as a model for the social production of knowledge. And, I wish to challenge us to critique those systems of thought that are presented to us in our literature more carefully than we as a community have shown ourselves inclined to. As Berlin reminds us, these issues are important to our work:

A particular rhetoric thus instructs students about the nature of genuine knowledge, or truth—sometimes, for example, located in the material world, sometimes in a private perception of a spiritual realm, sometimes in group acquiescence, sometimes in language itself, sometimes in one or another dialectical permutation of these elements. The nature of truth will in turn determine the roles of the interlocutor (the writer or speaker) and the audience in discovering and communicating it. (4)

The stance(s) we take toward how best to teach writing are determined by our view of where truth is located and how it can be accessed by novice writers.

We Stand Here. No, There.

In our writing center work, we have been encouraged to see ourselves as occupying one of three epistemological spaces. By this I mean, in the past twenty years or so, our job description has changed, and we have redefined what are our educative goals. These redescrptions and reconceptualizations

reflect changes in the way we view reality and our function within that view and result from competition between differing political, ideological, and epistemological forces.²

The first space we claimed as our home was within an objectivist epistemology. The positivist assumptions about truth—the notion that truth is transcendent and resides “out there” and, as such, can be objectively studied, analyzed, quantified, and eventually prescribed—defined who we were as a community and what we understood our primary educational purpose to be. To fall back once again on worn-out terms, we viewed ourselves as the writing fix-it shop, the place where malfunctioning language users were sent to be reprogrammed. We understood our purpose to be a supplement to writing instruction. Writing in 1975, Betty McFarland typified this attitude by noting,

An objective common to each [composition] course is mechanical correctness. Usually time and/or philosophy does not permit the teaching of grammar in each course; further, the variety and irregularity of student errors would not justify doing so. The logical place for such supplemental instruction is in a laboratory. (153)

I don't think it necessary to rehash all the arguments against the practices and founding philosophies of writing labs in their most positivist-influenced forms. That job has been done repeatedly throughout the past decade or two in the arguments that established expressionist and social constructionist epistemologies as the dominant theoretical positions in post-secondary writing center instruction.

The second epistemological home presented to us has been within the expressionistic or romantic view of knowledge production. Expressionist epistemology conceives of truth/knowledge as being a product of the individual: truth resides “within.” The extensive literature produced by the writing center community that tells us to help writers discover their own writing processes, their own voices, and their own truths—attitudes encouraged by the work of such respected teachers as Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and closer to our home in the writing center, Muriel Harris—is grounded firmly in the belief that truth emanates from within the individual and thus the teacher's/tutor's goal is to assist the student in learning how to tap into that latent repository.

One-to-one instruction in particular reflects the emphasis on the individual location of truth that is at the center of expressionist epistemology, in that it sets two individuals at work with the goal of helping less mature writers access their potential/voice/process. As such, expressionism is the most

apparent epistemology at work in the writing center. And I would hazard to guess that most members of the writing center community are romantics to the extent that we maintain, in the words of Steven North, that “our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (438). We see ourselves as coaches, facilitators, those who help less experienced writers see that they can write successfully. We strive to make these writers see that they do have something to say that is worth hearing. We believe in the worth of the individual.

Then, there is a third epistemological position, epistemic rhetoric/social construction, that has been touted recently as the true home of writing centers. The controlling idea here is that knowledge results from the interaction of individuals and society. The most forward proponent of this epistemological space being the proper home of the writing center is Lisa Ede, who, in a 1989 *Writing Center Journal* article, “Writing as a Social Process: A Theoretical Foundation for Writing Centers,” writes, “research on writing as a social process . . . implicitly argues for the centrality of what we do in our writing centers” (10). Ede wants us to agree with her that writing center instruction implicitly—and I read her to mean explicitly as well, although she does not discuss specific practices in which social constructionist epistemology is evident—works within the epistemic paradigm of a community arriving at agreement about what it will recognize as truth. This is an intellectually compelling and rhetorically effective argument. But I doubt the accuracy of its description of the types of instruction that take place in the writing center, as I doubt the accuracy of either of the two previous descriptions of writing center activity we have discussed.

Where is that Perfect Fit?

Problems exist in the attempt to posit any of these three epistemologies as the one foundation on which writing centers stand. Too often, however, the problems that have been noted by the writing center community with these positions (we have commented on them at times) are not simply theoretical problems, but problems that manifest themselves when we examine the practices we employ generally (and I use “generally” because I am fully aware of the diversity that exists across writing centers at the secondary and post-secondary level).

The problems inherent in taking a positivist epistemology as the foundation for writing center theory and practice are the easiest to locate of the three epistemologies under discussion here. Positivism, and the ways in which its assumptions are made manifest in composition and impact our conceptions of teacher and student roles, has received much attention in the

community's literature. But, for our purposes, there exists a more central problem with positivism and the writing center: positivism creates a system of thought that is too rigid to explain adequately all that goes on in the writing center as tutors sit and work with writers. Positivist pedagogy ignores the contextual nature of discourse and the malleability of language. As such it is ill-equipped to deal with the many variations on seemingly endless themes that parade through the writing center on any given day.

For instance, handbooks and grammar workbooks prescribe a standard use of the language that presents writers a reduced range of options to use in their writing. The many contradictions and arcane peculiarities that exist within the rules of standard written English are suppressed within a positivist-influenced philosophy of teaching. Often students are left more bewildered and unsure of their ability to negotiate the terrain of written discourse successfully, and thus are not likely to take any risks in their writing or to trust or value their instinctual understanding of the grammar of their native tongue. More than that, these prescriptive resources deny a valid place in written discourse to grammars and dialects other than those that maintain a position of power and prestige.

Likewise, an exclusively expressionistic epistemology does not provide an adequate description of writing center practice, regardless of how hard we as a community try to present it as sufficient. The primary focus of expressionism is on the individual as the central agent in the process of making meaning. This romantic notion places truth in the domain of the individual, and as such, ignores the extent to which the social group determines what action the individual can take within society. As a result of this very subjective position, expressionism refuses to acknowledge the extent to which individuals are products of, even inconceivable outside of, the larger social group.

In the writing center, this belief can lead us to ignore or devalue the demands the institution and the academic community place upon writers who wish to join the community of academe. Placing the individual as the locus of truth—as is often the case in Rogerian-influenced one-to-one tutoring—can lend novice writers a false sense of primacy within the communities they wish to join. Foregrounding within the writing center tutorial individuals' beliefs and experiences to the exclusion of the beliefs and experiences of the larger social group suggests an autonomy, an ability for distinct individualism, that may be utopian, unrealizable, and defeating. Such a focus on individuals and their values and interpretations of reality can, in worst case scenarios, allow for the justification of a totally relativistic, all-beliefs-are-equal brand of tutorial interaction; however, such an attitude

pointedly ignores/suppresses the fiction of the existence of neutral educational environments.

Equally problematic is the social constructionist position as it has been articulated most often within the context of the writing center by Kenneth Bruffee (“Social Construction”), Lisa Ede, and others. Social constructionist thought looks at discourse production from the perspective of discourse communities and how these communities negotiate and mediate competing statements about reality to arrive at communally acceptable statements of truth. This macroview of discourse production, this investigation of the way the communal group negotiates meaning, minimizes the influence of the individual actor within the social group. With its intellectual tradition grounded in such socially-oriented philosophical positions as Marxism and much post-modern critical thought, social construction observes the group more so than the individual as the locus of the production of meaning. The individual is not considered a primary actor on the stage of discourse production because individuals are conceived most often as pieces of the social system with little possibility of truly autonomous action. The problem I am discussing here arises in social construction’s inability to explain chaos in the system, those examples of individual caprice, random and apparently illogical action that individuals in real writing centers seem to deliver from nowhere, and yet that affect the action—the meaning making—that goes on in the center.

Beyond this theoretical problem, social constructionist epistemology also proves problematic when its proponents attempt to demonstrate it in the daily practice of writing centers. The work of Kenneth Bruffee in particular has been heralded as epitomizing the epistemic reality of the writing center. His description of collaborative learning as he forwards it in “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” and “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” supposes that the tutor/tutee relationship is a site upon which knowledge is negotiated and new knowledge is created. While this is a compelling model because it locates the writing center as a locus of knowledge production rather than of knowledge remediation, it is also a limiting model, one that much of the writing center community has accepted uncritically.

A practical problem lies at the heart of Bruffee’s description of collaborative learning’s inability to explain the many interrelated systems that create the writing center environment. Both Harvey Kail and John Trimbur, for instance, have attempted to demonstrate how impossible it is for Bruffee’s idealized conception of peer tutoring to exist within writing centers. Trimbur has demonstrated the many forces of hierarchical social systems that impinge

upon the tutoring relationship and that reveal, as his title announces, peer tutoring to be a contradiction in terms. Likewise, Kail has examined the many inherent political problems—institutional and interpersonal—that are ignored most often when members of the writing center community discuss collaborative learning as a process by which knowledge is created.

In a more recent critique, Lisa Ede suggests that Bruffee's vision of collaborative learning is based not on the epistemic model of knowledge production to which it has been linked but on a more romantic idea of the individual as the locus of truth. She points to the fact that "Bruffee at times praises collaborative learning as a means of helping students escape the inevitable solitariness of writing, whose self-imposed isolation is often seen as particularly troubling for beginning writers" (6). Such a point suggests that Bruffee's ideal is to bring individuals through the tutoring process to a point of sophistication that they ultimately can be their own tutor and can then return to the solitary model of reality endorsed by expressionist epistemology.

Why this desire for a true home?

My point in this essay has been to illustrate that none of the three epistemological locations that historically have been described as the true home of the writing center is able finally to mold the writing center and the work it does to fit that epistemology's specific contours. This inability stems in a large part from the fact that each approach is not able to take into account all of the forces that impact writing center instruction. Too many forces remain outside each of these position's consideration and conceptualization of how diverging views of discourse production act on writing centers. For instance, each epistemology we have considered cannot deal adequately with the many conflicting political agendas and forces that define a writing center from its foundational philosophy to its instructional methods to its physical shape. There are too many departmental forces and agendas, too many larger political forces and agendas, too many instructional forces and agendas that shape every writing center to be adequately explained and integrated by any one version of what is true. This inability is evident even before we bring into play other factors that impinge upon the environment of a writing center such as personal ideologies of the director and staff.

Why then has there been such a clamor in the writing center community for us to locate once and for all the true epistemological home of the writing center? Why have we seemed to be so concerned about whether our work should focus on individual writers or on the way the social group creates knowledge through its discourse? The answers are many, but, I would like to suggest the following as reasons that particularly influence this desire:

1) A maturing understanding of our activities.

As the writing center community's understanding of its role within the educational agenda of most American post-secondary institutions has matured, we have come to realize how limited were some of our original ideas about our activities and how these methods affected the learning we witnessed in our students. We moved beyond purely positivist pedagogies reflected in drill/remediation labs when we recognized they did not adequately explain the varied learning strategies students employ. Likewise, we moved beyond a pure focus on individual writers when we began to recognize how this pedagogy fell short of accounting for the presence of the social group in meaning-making.

Each time we have moved our focus we have had to sacrifice the sense of security achieved in thinking that we knew what we were doing in our centers. Assuredness is a more comfortable position to be in than the flux that results as we attempt to make sense of our activities in light of new perspectives about learning and discourse production. But any sense of certainty may always be a fiction if, according to Wallace and Simpson, "writing centers are dynamic, not static," and "that change and adjustments to new problems come with the territory" (xii). Approaching this situation from a pragmatic angle, my colleague Alan Jackson reminds me that in our attempts to critique writing center theory and practice, we must continually ask ourselves the following question: Have we reached a point of stability that even allows us to get a good look at writing centers?

2) A disciplinary insecurity.

If we can say we do X because we ground our teaching philosophy in Y, we think that we seem more respectable, more normal to the rest of the academic community. After all, we have been led to believe that other members of the academy, especially the sciences, know exactly on what epistemology they base their entire educational project. In other words, the rest of the academy seems to know from where they came intellectually and to where they are headed. The need for a positive sense of self forces us to ignore the many ways in which the theories we forward to explain what we do in the writing center fail to adequately describe the hodge-podge practices we actually employ. A rhetoric of certainty ("Y philosophical stance fully explains X pedagogy") is appealing to—as Louise Wetherbee Phelps describes us—"a young field determined to establish a scholarly ethos" (206); it is seductive. But is such security accurate?

3) A political motivation.

Each time we have claimed a home in a particular epistemology we may have done so not for the ways that version of reality articulates our practice,

but for the ways in which it allies us to a powerful political movement within academics. For instance, the process movement and its pedagogical emphasis on the individual, may have been embraced by the writing center community not for the support it lent to such practices as one-to-one instruction, but for the way it fit the writing center and the larger composition community into the powerful social changes ushered in by the challenges leveled at dominant social systems by many sectors of American society in the late sixties and early seventies. Likewise, the current interest in justifying writing center pedagogy by linking it to social constructionist thought can be viewed as an attempt to link the writing center to the intellectually and institutionally powerful forces marshalled under the banners of post-structuralist thought. We have yet to investigate the possibility that our claims to epistemological allegiance are based more on achieving a desired set of political goals than on arriving at an adequate understanding of the writing center environment.

4) A trap of dualist thought

Amid all the recent calls in the profession for entertaining multiple perspectives about what we do and value, amid the more phenomenological perspective that has attracted many allies within composition studies and the writing center community, I continue to sense the presence of, and quite possibly the hegemonic influence of, positivist systems of thought. What I mean is this: while we have announced that we believe the positivist assumption that one truth exists is a system of thought inadequate to our needs, we still cling to its underlying structure. We have not managed to make the radical break with the dyadic systems of thought that by allegiance to a hermeneutical epistemological position we necessarily need to have made. For the most part, we continue to announce our positions, defend our instructional practices using a dualist rhetoric of *yes/no*, *right/wrong* dyads. We have not realized the phenomenologist's perspective (to name one) that "many equally valid descriptions are possible" (Emig 67).

The problem that results most prominently from this dualist trap is that we cannot realize the claims we have made for our allegiance to privileged systems of thought. We cannot find a pristine epistemological home for the writing center because we use a rhetoric that forces us to look for and find credible only those epistemologies that can withstand the withering gaze of a *right/wrong* questioning. None of the systems I have discussed in this essay are able to do so. Each can only "correctly" describe the writing center within certain parameters; beyond those restrictions they are no longer "right." As we have seen, each of the dominant epistemologies evidenced in writing center theory and practice exists on both sides of the *right/wrong* dyad. Thus, the desire we express for certainty—for pristine epistemological foundations

for the writing center, for a true theory and practice—will, because of our inability to see/use/believe options beyond the limited yes/no choice available through our positivist-influenced ways of thinking, not be realized. We will remain in flux.

The writing center's equilibrium

My title promised some resolution for this discussion. I promised to demonstrate the equilibrium the writing center community has managed to maintain within the battles of competing epistemologies that have raged around us. This equilibrium exists in spite of our best efforts to ignore it or to force it to conform to contours that are not natural to its shape.

I have gained one important insight from my investigation of the epistemologies that affect the writing center: the writing center has the ability to conform to all three epistemologies I explored. This ability reflects the inability I discussed of writing center theory and practice to occupy convincingly only one epistemological space. I believe we have been looking at the writing center and its epistemological influences from the wrong perspective. We have taken a reductionist view of the problem: we have tried to find the one system of thought in which the writing center fits. This is a hopeless effort. I suggest instead that we apply the hermeneutic perspective we as a community have paid lip service to and that we thus acknowledge that each of these three epistemologies is actively present in the theory and practice of the writing center, that together they create a system that is more able to adequately describe the writing center than any of the three can in isolation.

I see the writing center equilibrium resulting from the fact that we, as the people responsible for the continued success of our writing centers, are not actually walking any one of the epistemological tightropes our community has often suggested we are. Rather, I think that each of us, when we honestly examine our theory and practice, will see that we maintain our equilibrium because we are firmly grounded in an epistemological mix: we have one foot planted in both expressivist and social epistemologies, while we keep at least one hand in positivism.

Notes

¹ Without the discussions I have had about these issues with Bob Child, Alan Jackson, Christina Murphy, and Ray Wallace, the ideas presented in this essay would still be nagging me without an apparent outlet. I wish to thank Tom Hemmeter and Alan Jackson, as well, for their willingness to read and respond to numerous drafts of this article.

² See James Berlin's overview of this subject in *Rhetoric and Reality* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987).

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Eric H. Hobson is an Assistant Professor of English at Southwest Missouri State University, where he directs the Writing Center and serves as consultant to the university's Writing to Learn program. He recently completed a dissertation that critiques writing center theory and practice.