Letters

"Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center'"

In his essay, "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center,'" Steve North engages in a rare, and welcome, strategy of autocritique. That is, he integrates confession with self-critique, a genre not often seen in academic journals. North also qualifies his contribution to reimagining writing centers by claiming that the idiosyncratic nature of institutional arrangements prevents him from offering any sort of global writing center political vision (15). This much about North's essay I applaud. What troubles me, and what prompts this letter, is that in themselves both his confessions and his "local struggle" tactics are important disclaimers, but when combined with the dose of realism he gives us, North ends up sounding a cynical and defeatist alarm. In other words, when North claims that the "general ideal" of writing centers still holds, but then follows that with his lack of faith in applying energy toward realizing that ideal, his reader is left discouraged and puzzled about the future of writing center work. I don't happen to think we should be discouraged, nor am I unclear about the future work writing centers are capable of doing in the fields of rhetoric and composition, inside institutions, and in terms of individual student writing. But I fear for how others will read North.

In my opinion, there are two reasons why North's essay is discouraging. First, he links writing centers to writing programs as if that link is what should measure the success (and thus the energy one should put into it) of a writing center. Second, and perhaps more unconsciously, North's use of the film Dead Poet's Society as an analogy runs aground toward the end when he reveals what really bothers him about idealistic portrayals of English teachers—and

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idealistic portrayals of writing center tutoring. But I'll get to that in a minute.

First, yes, it is important to analyze the effectiveness (or non-effectiveness) of required writing courses in terms of the ability of writing program resources to offer quality instruction to mass numbers of students, and, in situations where lack of resources affects quality, to propose radical rethinking of writing programs and their missions (as North has done at Albany). The question is whether the writing center's mission should be redefined according to that same logic. In other words, if (as North suggests) writing programs that allow students who value writing to self-selectively enroll are indeed a better use of writing program resources (and I agree with him), doesn't it stand to reason that writing centers, which have always (for the most part) allowed students to self-selectively attend should be mobilizing efforts toward securing more resources to continue the important work they do with such motivated, self-selected students, rather than scale back their services to match the scaled-down versions of the writing program they are linked with? To bind writing program goals with writing center goals in such a way sends a dangerous mixed signal to institutions, namely, that funding writing programs and writing centers should be synonymous. Of course, in a perfect world, both writing programs and writing centers would never lack for sufficient resources. But given the questionable viability of large-scale required writing courses, it seems irresponsible to link writing centers with writing programs so rigidly that the institution matches funding for funding and thereby diminishes severely the potential for the writing center to play an important role in the writing of students not in those courses, much less to play a significant role in the institutional commitment to writing instruction in all disciplines.

North's proposal suggests a kind of fortress mentality, it seems to me. To be sure, writing centers often serve in the role of institutional conscience and in a ritual of institutional martyrdom. While North suggests that serving as the "staff literacy scapegoat gives us no more power to alter . . . flawed institutional arrangements" (18), his response of building a writing center devoted to those students and faculty who they can "actually, sanely, responsibly bring together" (17) strikes me as a surrender to the forces that he suggests need altering. Why not call the scapegoating into question? Why not work from within the "belly of the monster" (as Donna Haraway puts it)? Why not continue to work to establish writing center accreditation (as Joe Law, Jeanne Simpson, and others are advocating), to work toward freestanding writing centers not associated with English departments (as some centers have achieved), to work toward a time when Freshman English, whether required or not, is no longer the prime determinant in the writing center mission or funding justification?

It seems to me that his tone is defeatist. I had expected him to say that
not much has changed since that article first appeared, that only in local struggles, like his, can writing centers move into an arena where institutions no longer bring out the sacrificial scapegoat when a victim is needed in literacy politics. I expected him to encourage writing centers to work toward gaining more institutional power, not retreat to a service-oriented mentality, and to service only the motivated students of his choice at that (i.e., the students signed up for the courses in his revamped writing program).

Finally, I detect a fear at work in North’s piece that perhaps taps into a common fear among teachers, but I’m not so sure writing center tutors and administrators can identify. When North returns to the Keating character from Dead Poet’s Society, he suggests that to portray good teachers as idealistic (with an inevitable exile/scapegoating) leaves the rest of us wondering what we are. North’s question—“what’s the message?” (18)—follows an either/or mentality. Either we are “truly talented, truly-in-tune, truly committed” English teachers (he doesn’t mention writing center tutors here), suffering the institutional martyrdom like Keating, or we (unlike fictive characters) can rewrite the script. If martyrdom is the inevitable fate of “truly committed” teachers, he wonders, this means, “in turn, that those of us who (like the repressive headmaster) stay on are . . . what, exactly?” (18). I wonder what his question turns on—a kind of fear that the rest of us are repressive? . . . ineffective? . . . not truly committed? . . . not truly talented?

Cynthia Haynes-Burton
University of Texas at Dallas

Steve North Responds

Cynthia Haynes-Burton covers a fair amount of territory in her response to my essay, but at its heart our disagreement—insofar as we have one—seems to me to be tactical: a disagreement about means, not ends.

As I tried to indicate at the end of my article, I conceive of my professional work in general, and at Albany in particular, as part of a continuing (re)negotiation over the place of writing in higher education. My general goal in this respect—the ideal—has never wavered, and while I won’t presume to speak for Professor Haynes-Burton, I would infer that hers is not dissimilar. My own could be stated something like this: Writing (and writing instruction, if that distinction needs to be made) should be an integral feature of every student’s academic program—all the way through that program—regardless of major; and students should also have, as a part of that integration, ready access to a writing center whenever they need it.

There are any number of ways to go about working toward such a goal
in a given institution, none of them mutually exclusive (at least in any absolute sense), and none of them permanent or inflexible, either. Over the long institutional haul, especially, negotiations of this kind involve give and take, push and pull, changes in tactics and players by all the parties involved. Thus, the Writing Sequence I sketch in my article—rhetoric and poetics established within the English major as the focus for disciplinary study—is only one result of more than fifteen years of negotiating that included, among lots of other things I might list, the founding of the Writing Center, the phasing out of freshman composition (as we knew it), the development of a university-wide writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) program, the emergence of the Writing Center as the hub for all WAC activity, the establishment (this year) of a Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning—all of which, one way or another, have been aimed at altering the role writing plays at the University at Albany.

And this will by no means be the end of the process. Thus, the configuration of Writing Sequence and Writing Center I described is designed to consolidate the structural improvements we have already won, and thereby strengthen our position for subsequent negotiations. The scenario might play out something like this. Other departments, attracted by the coherence and intensity of the Writing Sequence’s courses and its special ties with the Writing Center, will inquire of us how they might get a piece of that action: Can their students take our writing courses and—if primary concern in this context—make similar use of our Writing Center, be part of this enterprise that makes talk about writing a regular curricular activity?

I would expect to greet such inquiries with two options. The first: that we would gladly serve as consultants to such departments (in exchange for release time, say, or some similar compensation). As consultants, we would help them (a) redesign their curriculum to incorporate writing in the courses their faculty taught; and (b) design a writing center suited to their particular needs, which they would staff and operate (although we would obviously be happy to keep in regular contact). The second option, of course, would be for us to expand our offerings in courses and/or the Writing Center—but in exchange for the resources it would take for us to do so. Such expansions might take any number of forms, but let me stress that they would have to be in exchange for real resources, committed long term: not a onetime $1000 payment from somebody’s S&E budget, but a faculty line, say, or an assistantship. If the work is important enough to do, and do right, it’s important enough to pay for. If my colleagues in another department think they can get the job done with that $1000, I invite them to get on with it.

I don’t want to seem (simple-mindedly) hardheaded here. As I say, this is one general scenario—albeit one which, based on what I know of the situation, is quite plausible—but it isn’t hard to envision others, and we will
adjust as necessary. I also don't want to seem hardhearted. Professor Haynes-
Burton worries about the students who might find it harder to get time in our
Writing Center if it becomes too closely affiliated with our Writing Se-
quence. I worry about students who are denied access to the Center, too, and
have been their advocate for a very long time. That was the point of my
extended account of the arithmetic realities of our Center’s resources. A
writing center staffed to support 200 tutorial hours per week at a university
of 17,000 students clearly offers very limited access to begin with. Worse,
when that center seeks to use those hours to meet an increasingly broad array
of institutional needs—to become all things to all people—it runs a consid-
erable risk of being of limited value to anyone.

In moving to affiliate the Center with the Sequence, then, I hope we can
do two things at once, both of them in keeping with the scenario I sketched
above. First, this move will serve to remind the institution just how finite the
resources of the Center are. It would be nicer, obviously, if the arithmetic by
itself would do that—but in the fifteen years of our existence, it has rarely
done so. Second, and no less important, it will model one version of what
a good working relationship between center and curriculum looks like, in
terms of both pedagogy and resources. From a tactical perspective, in other
words, moving to affiliate the Center with the Sequence seems to me to
provide our best chance—especially long term—of making possible the kind
of access to writing center instruction that both Professor Haynes-Burton
and I desire.

Steve North
University at Albany

“The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers”

I was plenty riled by Terrance Riley’s article “The Unpromising Future
of Writing Centers” in the Fall issue of WCJ. His either/or proposition
presumes that, if we give the baby a bath, the baby is doomed to go out with
the bath water. His solution is a dirty, unhealthy baby.

While I haven’t been in writing center work long and may not have the
historical perspective that others have, I do have a recent and ongoing
experience of writing center professionalism that contradicts Professor
Riley’s assertion of an inevitable downward curve. When I needed to “get up
to speed” on writing centers two years ago, I turned to the people with
experience and to the professional literature and research. I found the
literature generally accessible, and the professionals welcomed my questions.
This was not the usual cohort of critics and theorists whose practice of analytic dissection is replicated in its factionalized, competitive "community." In my experience, writing center professionals not only preach collaboration, they practice it.

What I have learned from writing center professionals, I have used and passed on to our tutors. As a result of this professional guidance—rather than relying on the tutors to train themselves, as Professor Riley suggests—we are more confident and more effective in assisting writers. If our growing success in helping writers is part of a downward curve, then maybe we'd better redefine "up" and "down."

Actually, I think the problem I have with Professor Riley's assertions is in his implied absolutist's definitions of "good" and "bad." Those definitions presume a paradigm of professionalism in which we bargain our souls for "authority." I have two objections to this. One is that I honestly believe—with experiential reason—that authority is constructed differently among writing center professionals than among American literature specialists or critical theorists. It is also constructed differently than professionalism in composition studies, which I see related to writing centers more as theoretical psychology is related to clinical psychology (fields with their own bodies of knowledge and differing models of professionalism).

My second objection is Professor Riley's willingness to define all "pain" as evil and therefore something to be avoided at all costs. As the profession develops its paradigm it will inevitably attract its share of the world's pedants, egocentric obfuscators, and all-around pains in the ass. However, instead of seeking relief of the symptoms (following the traditional medical model), we should follow the wisdom of the body's system: pains are a warning that we've picked up a splinter or a disease which must be removed, cured, or endured until it's run its course. Continuing the health and malady metaphors, give us a good "wellness" program and we'll never need surgery.

Therefore, perhaps we should read Professor Riley's pessimistic speculation as a splinter that reminds us to be careful now that we've been allowed on the playground equipment. But I think writing centers foster a self-awareness that is already more adult than childish. Adults wash babies gently—and they don't throw them out with the bath water.

Bobbie Silk
Illinois Wesleyan University

I read Terrance Riley's article, "The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers," with a great deal of interest and some irritation. If I understand him correctly, Professor Riley argues that in pursuing stability and success writing
centers may hasten their own demise, and that increasing professionalism will lead to insularity, conformity, and, ultimately, to failure. In essence, Riley argues, first, that writing centers, because their goals and methods differ from the rest of the academy, work best from the margins, and second, that they are in danger of being co-opted by the “mass education model” following in the steps of American literature, literary theory, and composition studies.

Professor Riley has done a service for writing centers insofar as he has sounded a warning that writing center professionals need to be conscious of what they do best: teach students to write in nontraditional settings that appear to run counter to the mass education model. He has also raised successfully the issue of writing center identity which, judging by the response to his article on WCENTER, has touched something of a raw nerve. A number of Riley’s assertions hit the mark. Writing centers in some ways do appear to resemble composition studies in its early days when it was “interdisciplinary, untidy, its borders permeable” (27), and his assertion that the three comparison groups all lost something in the transition from the margins to the center is at least arguable. Equally important, writing center professionals frequently talk about themselves as outsiders looking for a way into the power-centers of their institutions. Riley poses some serious questions about the wisdom of such maneuvers.

However, Professor Riley’s contention that writing centers need fear success because they risk being co-opted by the education establishment like the other three oversimplifies the place of writing centers in their institutions, underestimates the importance of scholarship, and ignores the political liabilities of self-marginalization. It’s unclear why writing centers need fear repeating the history of American literature, literary theory, and composition studies, for instance, and why writing centers need to be marginalized in order to be pedagogically effective.

First of all, because writing centers are already so heterogeneous and interdisciplinary, there is little danger of their ever being confused with academic departments, much less with academic disciplines. Professor Riley’s attempt to link the history of writing centers with the histories of American literature, literary theory, and composition studies does not accurately reflect the unique goals and administrative structures of writing centers. Writing centers offer no course work (save occasional tutor-training courses mentioned by Riley), no majors or minors, and no graduate programs. In short, they do not compete with other disciplines, nor will they ever compete with them. Many if not most writing centers are staffed by students and non-tenurable faculty, hardly a group which threatens to take over the English department.

Furthermore, the administrative structures of writing centers differ so much from institution to institution that creating a monolithic model (which one would assume to be a prerequisite for becoming part of mass education)
is highly unlikely. No one knows what the ideal writing center looks like because no such thing exists. How is a writing center directed by a non-tenure-track faculty member, staffed largely by undergraduate or graduate students, administrated under the auspices of a dean, and located in a library going to be co-opted by mass education? The situation is even more complicated if high school writing centers are included in the equation, because their administrative structures differ markedly from those on the college level.

These differences make it difficult for institutions to follow a monolithic structural model of writing centers even if they wanted to. Do writing centers belong in a department or under the control of a dean or director of a library? Professor Riley, in his attempt to imagine the future of writing centers, seems to assume that all writing centers are located in English departments on the university level. Writing centers are linked by common purpose and, to some extent, by a common methodology, but not by common administrative structures.

Second, when Professor Riley argues that “each conventionally-measured advance in our professional status, every move closer to the mainstream, reduces our variety and our breadth of vision” (30), he draws an unfortunate dichotomy between professionalism and vision. Of course, writing center professionals need to be wary of insularity and defensiveness, but Riley seems to assume that writing centers which are vibrant, elastic, and true to their missions must at the same time steer clear of professionalism. Yet the professional literature of writing centers, as evidenced in *The Writing Center Journal* and *Writing Lab Newsletter*, among other places, as well as the discussions at the National Writing Center Conference and the Conference on Peer Tutoring, is characterized by a close connection of theory to practice. The argument that professionalism inevitably leads to insularity and vision to transience does not seem borne out in the trenches.

Third, writing center professionalization cannot be equated with failure. Professor Riley calls for a writing center society grounded in “happy amateurism” (32), without dissertations (or at least without dissertations written about writing centers), without theory, and without job openings advertised in the MLA. The fact is that the vast majority of writing centers are already marginalized. At best writing centers can establish a separate but equal position in relation to other departments, and even this is beyond their reach in many institutions.

Finally, there is no indication that professionalism, in this sense, has any bearing on the effectiveness of writing centers. Writing centers, I suspect, can be successful regardless of their shape, as long as the director and tutors are attentive to the needs of students. To say that a dissertation on writing centers makes one an ineffective tutor is as pointless as saying that such a dissertation is a prerequisite to good tutoring.
Writing center professionals need fear being co-opted when faculty from across the disciplines concede that departments are unnecessary, classroom instruction is overrated, and that their curricula should be discarded in favor of one-on-one instruction in their offices. Until then, writing centers will continue to look pretty different from the rest of the academy.

Byron L. Stay
Mount St. Mary’s College

Terrance Riley Responds

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Professors Silk and Stay (and my other friends, known and unknown, on WCENTER), and to say that while I might have set out to “rile,” in the older sense of “stir up,” I did not wish to cause anger or hurt. Like Professor Silk, I find writing center people more caring, cooperative, and concerned than tillers of other fields, and I wish for us all many more years of caring and cooperating. We are indeed, at present, student-centered like no other officially sanctioned academic unit; like no other would-be discipline, we welcome the diversity of writing centers across the country, and we welcome a diversity amounting to disarray, at times, in our own centers; and on many campuses, we are the only spot that, on a daily basis, can be called “interdisciplinary.”

But I ask whether we can maintain these qualities of openness and interaction, or whether success will find us complacent or competitive. My answer, in “The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers” (glossing Professor Stay’s opening paraphrase), is that if we seek the sort of success currently respectable in academic culture, we are going to lose our differences from that culture, differences that energize our work and make it valuable—worth doing in itself, I mean: worthy.

And yes, I mean that this is inevitable. As we professionalize, we will inevitably turn away from student writers; we will become profession-centered and theory-centered rather than student-centered. Most of us are already pretty tired of the limitations of our service role, tired of hearing “why don’t you do this?” from History or Nursing, or even from the composition teachers. Our strongest counterargument is to reject the complaint by offering a pocket version of our professional model: “Writing centers do this; we don’t do such-and-so.” That is the strongest defense precisely because that’s what all the other disciplines say by way of fielding complaints: “We teach math thinking, not balancing checkbooks”; “I’m teaching philosophy, not civics.” These are not evil responses, in themselves, but they are certainly not for the students; on the contrary, the customary division of university labor most often systematically ignores the needs of the students or the needs
of any one student, giving priority to the discipline (and not incidentally to the professors’ senses of professional identity). The more writing centers claim their own academic mandate, the more attractive it will be to put the professional protocol first. (Sympathetic teachers in other disciplines expect this. I am sometimes asked to visit classes to explain “what you do and what you don’t do, in there.”)

If we continue on our current course toward a professional identity, it is inevitable that we will all start looking and sounding alike; that is part of what “professional” means, and it has happened consistently in this century, whenever a good cross-fertilization of ideas has taken on the aspect of a career option. This does not mean that we will adhere to the same theories, as I will argue presently; rather, we will develop a limited set of interests and reach consensus on the borders of our territory. Writing center dissertations will beget more graduate course work in the area and refinement of a set of canonical works and principles, and these will find their way—have already—into undergraduate career preparation. We won’t need to offer additional courses or create majors and minors in “writing center.” We will simply do what we now do with promising majors who anticipate graduate work in medieval literature or literary theory: enroll them in the available courses, direct them to the appropriate readings, and mentor them into the right Ph.D. program. In fifteen or twenty years, writing centers may be directed by individuals who have “specialized” in writing centers since they were barely out of their teens.

Thus it will be inevitable that we will forget, perhaps even in one generation, what we know now; that above all what makes writing center work exciting is its (unsanctioned) internal heterogeneity: the diversity of voices and ideas, and the somesort of mutuality—elastic and ephemeral—that sticks them together: a word and an idea passed from mind to mind, and the newness and questioning of it all. And the personalities. Stacy, Aaron, and Collette bring voices and presences to the Bloomsburg writing center; our visitor-writers are a substantial presence; I bring something. We make something together, and it is necessarily ephemeral; it won’t be the same next year, when Chris and Chelle and Nicole and Krissy are gone. We will forget this, or become confused and come to believe or want to believe that the energy comes from our methodology or our theories, and that therefore it can be made permanent.

I think we cannot imagine all the changes that will occur as we become more uniformly trained and “prepared.” But at least, as our preparation becomes more detailed, we must increasingly withdraw from connection to other disciplines. We must, because first, as I wrote in “The Unpromising Future,” we must mark off a distinct territory if we expect any of the usual institutional rewards. We will, perhaps soon, withdraw even from composition studies; look only at how far composition studies has pulled away from
literature, a thing quite unimaginable at one time. And second, we will withdraw and become intellectually isolated because the more writing center books and articles there are to read, the more we'll read them; that's what academic professional do. We will stop reading (and stop writing about) Du Bois and Woolf and Sartre, and start writing about each other, citing and correcting each other. In a few years WCJ won't be readable by someone outside the "profession"; even composition specialists won't understand the network of issues, histories, and citations.

And can anyone think we will stop with one paradigm? It took the New Criticism two generations, about, to build and refine its paradigm, and to exhaust itself upon most of the available canon. Luckily for the writers of dissertations of the fifties and sixties, structuralism and archetypal criticism came along. And then as the academy expanded, the pace of change accelerated, and we took up Marxism, deconstruction, hermeneutics, new historicism, feminism, and culture studies to provide new paradigms to satisfy our hunger for building permanent monuments to our understanding. The humanities disciplines thrive on competing models; the intensity of the squabbling, bizarrely, is one of higher ed’s indicators of health.

I know this is Cassandra-talk again, but here goes: as soon as we complete “our paradigm,” we will begin competing to create new ones. Cooperative or not, collaboration notwithstanding. Let me be even more annoying: we would be rash and foolish to think ourselves wholly immune to those forces in intellectual history which have created the academy in its present form, and which, like some vast metaphysical breeder reactor, continue to generate factions. One paradigm will invite another.

And why is any of this important in the larger scheme of things? Well, pick a reason: because we live in a time in which people are confused by demagogues competing for their attention, and their confusion leads to hatred; because we have gotten better and better at defining our differences while remaining clumsy at talking through our potential similarities; because we have created a culture of experts which prevents people from feeling in control of their lives. And why do I blame college professors? Because at best they do nearly nothing to counter the forces that drive people apart, and at worst, which is most of the time, they compound the problem by their damned compartmentalization of knowledge, their refusal to tolerate mixing and difference, and their mindless mythology of purity, discipline, and specialization. As much as anything, I blame college professors for driving themselves into social irrelevance, as they continue to debate finer and finer points of their theories, while the city burns.

So this is why “writing centers need fear repeating the history of American literature, literary theory, and composition studies”—because something most valuable (unique, in fact, on many campuses) will be lost if we lose our student-centered character; and because, though at present we are
largely outside the culture of experts and the mythology of discipline, we could lose overnight the energy, the true energy, that drives our true successes.

Professor Stay believes that some portion of my fear is beside the point, that we will not get drawn into the mass ed machine because we're too different from the rest of the structures of education to begin with. I think we are not so different as he imagines, but in any case a writing center’s place in the administrative structure of a college is not crucial; we are quite smart enough to unify and act like a recognized discipline, even if we are untenurable and stuck in a library. Women’s studies is healthy as a discipline despite a wide range of local administrative arrangements. Professor Stay mentions the really crucial factors himself: “centers are linked by common purpose and, to some extent, by a common methodology.” The purpose and methodology are at the heart of disciplinarity, not the administrative structure. In the day-to-day exercise of her responsibilities and in her alliances to certain pedagogies or ideologies, it matters only little to a writing center director whether she reports to a chair or a dean or a provost. What matters—in the reporting—is whether she can indicate that she has a purpose and a methodology supported by “research” or “theory.”

From time to time, of course, all of us must use such a trope: “the most prestigious writing centers do it this way” or “the most recent theory indicates.” Thus we express (in my case, to my provost) that we are not stumbling about, but are allied to some reputable group. We distribute the risk of failure by developing standard operating procedures. This is not a subterfuge. Professor Stay is quite right that we seem especially careful to link theory and practice. As Professor Silk points out, we talk to each other, learn from each other, share troubles and solutions, and most especially wisdom (as for instance, what to say to the provost). But the clichés of professionalism are tropes, and not the whole truth. Professor Stay is closer to a significant truth when he writes that there is “no indication that professionalism . . . has any bearing on the effectiveness of writing centers.” This is correct, as far as I know. There is no evidence that our collective efforts to develop a common purpose and methodology improve the quality of the service we offer (just as there is no proof whatsoever that the relatively high degree of professional development of most composition programs has any bearing on the effectiveness of those programs).

In practice, most of us are not agnostics on the subject of success; rather (as always, when evidence fails), our faith is supplied by our ideology: professional development is equivalent to effectiveness. This particular item of faith is embraced by all disciplines, and is itself the “construction of authority” that credentials all the (willing) participants in the mass education system. Contra Professor Silk, the defining constructions of authority do not differ from department to department. I establish my authority as a writing
center director in exactly the same way as my friend Larry establishes himself
as a professor of chemistry: by knowing inside and out the literature of the
area, by publishing in that area, and by replicating the prevailing professional
models in the intellectual space I inhabit.

I have nothing against publishing which extends the peculiar sort of
passion that writers sometimes feel, or against dissertations on writing centers
under the same conditions. I did not say that “a dissertation on writing
centers makes one an ineffective tutor,” even though I am willing to entertain
the idea that it might. But surely, on the other hand (as Professor Stay
continues), a dissertation is not “a prerequisite to good tutoring.” If a
dissertation is not prerequisite to good tutoring, neither is a semester-long
training class. And neither, to repeat from my essay, is a dissertation necessary
to running a writing center.

What is necessary to do these sorts of things, and do them well? Love of
reading and writing probably, love of helping, good will, an open mind, a
quick mind, a fascination with other minds, an agile imagination, a tolerance
for difference and conflict, and experience. Experience probably goes nearer
the head of the list, or perhaps suffuses all the items.

Where, in this list, would we put “reading essays about writing center
theory”? Ahead of “love” or “good will”? Ahead of experience?

We all seem to be using the same definition of “professionalism”; I’m
pleased, for I had anticipated some difficulty there. We seem also to be using
the same definition of “paradigm,” drawn at some distance from Thomas
Kuhn, I should think. I am pleased at that too, for it is from my reading of
Kuhn that I am led to underestimate, or differently estimate, the importance
of research. According to Kuhn (in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions),
science does not progress in continual incremental steps, but rather leaps
from paradigm to paradigm—from geocentric to heliocentric understanding
of the solar system, for instance, and from mechanistic to relativistic models
of time and movement. When a new paradigm is established, the scientific
community does not simply move ahead, continually making new discover-
ies here and there; rather, it gathers around the paradigm, fleshing it out and
filling it in, and finding its applications.

Kuhn’s reputation has been more lasting in the humanities communities
than among scientists, because his model seems more perfectly pitched to us.
I might revert to the example of composition studies here. Current-
traditional, cognitive, process, social constructionism, dialogism—we have
gone from rhetoric to rhetoric in the last four decades, each one announced
with something of the fanfare of a revolution, and each turned over and over
in the professional journals, as if its appearance foretold some sea change in
teaching. Collaborative classroom groups and increased attention to inven-
tion and rewriting are changes students may have felt—and perhaps are not
a disappointing result for forty years of “research.” But what else has
composition studies done for the student writer? Are we not still running teacher-centered classes, or worse (because bloodless), theory-centered classes? Whether we bruit about dialogue or collaboration or rewriting strategies, are we not still beating a drum for all the students to march to?

For all these reasons, and with apologies to Professor Silk, I can barely suppress a shudder when I read “as the profession develops its paradigm.” Because that’s the animal, that’s the authority structure which, whatever specific shape it takes, will inevitably inform the way we come to deal with students. That we see them one at a time in no way prevents us from beating one drum for them all—or from asking our tutors to beat the drum when we are not there.

We need to remember what we already know, that our perception of the “cleanliness” and “health” of a discipline are consensual and comparative. Traditional scholars regard masses of publication and heated internal controversies as an indication of health. I used to think so too. Now I think rather that we are just prone to comparing our baby to other babies, and we are disturbed if ours is different. I don’t want to throw out the “sick, dirty” baby; I want to adopt him, and, to the disciplinarians who say, “why don’t you take that baby to the doctor?” or “give that baby a bath,” I want to say, “no: that’s the way he is, and he’s just fine.”

Terrance Riley
Bloomsburg University