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Revisiting "The Idea of a Writing Center"¹

Stephen M. North

I need to begin this essay—somewhat obliquely, I confess—by invoking the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*. That movie, as those of you who saw it may recall, tells the story of a group of boys who attend an exclusive private preparatory school called Welton Academy (located in what John Danaher, to whom I am indebted for this line of argument, calls eternally autumnal New England). Set in the early 1960s, the film focuses in particular on how the boys' lives are affected by their English teacher, himself a graduate of Welton: one John Keating (a name chosen, perhaps, for its Romantic resonances), played by Robin Williams.

Keating is the pivotal character in the film. Not the protagonist—in that sense, this really is the boys' story—but clearly the catalyst, the agent for change, the voice of freedom in a one-hundred-year-old boarding school whose four "pillars"—Tradition, Discipline, Honor, Excellence—are represented less as holding the school up than as weighing its students down. Thus, while Mr. Keating is not featured in all that many scenes, the ones he does appear in take on enormous significance, and none more so than the classroom scenes, three of the most crucial of which I'll sketch here.

The first of these—the students' introduction to Keating on the first day of classes—is set up by what amounts to a highlight film (or, more aptly, a lowlight film) of the other classes the boys attend before they arrive for English at what appears to be the end of the school day. All those classes are taught, as was English until Keating arrived to replace a now-revered retiree, by older men, dour, serious, strict men: the chemistry teacher who not only lays out an intimidating workload for the year, but who announces—with

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something close to a smirk—that the twenty questions at the end of Chapter One are due tomorrow; the trigonometry teacher who calls for “precision” above all else, and warns that every missed homework assignment will cost one point off the final grade (“Let me urge you now not to test me on this point”); the pointer-wielding Scot of a Latin teacher who leads his charges again and again through the declensions of “agricola.”

Keating is presented to us in an entirely different way. We see him first peeking at his students from the doorway of his office at the head of the classroom. Then he begins whistling—the *1812 Overture*—and walks, still whistling, through the classroom to the hallway door, and on out. There is a pause, a moment of student (and audience) puzzlement, until he sticks his head back in the doorway: “Well, come on!” The boys (and camera) follow him into the school’s vestibule where, after urging the “more daring” of them to call him “O captain, my captain” (after Whitman on Lincoln, as he tells them), he turns their attention to the trophy case photos of Welton graduates past. These pictured boys-turned-men-turned-moldering-corpses, Keating tells his lads, have a message. “Go on,” he tells them, “lean in. Hear it?” And when they are leaning in, the camera panning alternately over intent faces and ancient photos, he offers a kind of ventriloquial whisper: “Caaarpe! Caaarpe! Carpe diem! Seize the day, boys! Make your lives extraordinary!”

The second and third of these key classroom scenes serve to further flesh out this image of the English teacher as liberator, as Romantic—or, given the New England setting and the prominence of Thoreau’s phrase about “sucking the marrow out of life,” transcendentalist—revolutionary. In the second, he asks a student to read the textbook’s Introduction to Poetry, written by one J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D. (a name which, it’s worth noting, Williams manages to pronounce with considerable derision). It features a formula for computing poetic “greatness” [$G = I(mportance) \times P(erfection)$] that prompts Keating to declare “Excrement!” and to insist that the boys tear the page out and, when they have done that, to keep going, to tear out not only that page, but the entire Introduction: “Rip! Rip it out! We’re not laying pipe; we’re talking about poetry here.” And in the third key classroom scene—after we have seen Keating bring Shakespeare to life with vintage Robin Williams impressions of Marlin Brando as Brutus and John Wayne as Macbeth—he climbs atop his desk to dramatize our need to always, always try to see things from a new perspective. Again, he invites the boys to join him, as he invited them to join him in hearing voices and tearing textbooks; and we see in their ready agreement that his teachings are really beginning to take hold.

* * * * *

I don’t want to be too hard on this film. In fact, I enjoyed it, in its way, and find it quite moving. Still, as a teacher—and particularly as a teacher of English—I find it annoying, disturbing, irritating. I won’t say that no teacher

has ever played any version of this John Keating role in a classroom where I was a student; in limited ways, various teachers have, or at least I cast them in it. Nor would I say that I have never assumed such a role—invited, or at least accepted, the kind of teacher-student relationship Keating invites when he urges the “more daring” to call him, not Mr. Keating, but “Oh captain, my captain.”

But teaching English, at least for me, is not generally about grand entrances or grand gestures—neither dramatically tearing up textbooks, nor standing on top of desks. Certainly there is, or at least can be, an element of theater, something of the performance, in any teaching. The “scene” of teaching in our culture—our conceptions of knowing, the conversational dynamics of larger groups, and so on—pretty much guarantees that. *Dead Poets Society* sets up, or perhaps plays into, a grandiose, idealized version of that scene that is potentially dangerous for everyone involved—students, teachers, parents, administrators—especially as that idealization is allowed to embody expectations. Film is a wonderful, captivating medium, but it deals in illusion. Classroom life doesn’t come scripted or specially lit; there are no second or third takes, no sound track, no score, no editing. In a film like this, the dynamics of teaching are magically compressed; a few minutes of well-chosen footage can evoke a month or more of classroom interaction. In a real classroom, the teacher’s John Wayne impression doesn’t necessarily last any longer, but the action doesn’t end when the cameras stop rolling.

The reason I bring all this up in the context of writing centers, as you may have guessed from my title, is that I think my essay “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984) has performed . . . well, let us call it an equally ambivalent service for those of us in the writing center business: offered a version of what we do that is, in its own way, very attractive; but one which also, to the extent that it is a romantic idealization, presents its own kind of jeopardy. I don’t want to be too hard on this essay, either. Like *Dead Poets Society*, it was directed—explicitly—at a larger public: those, it says, not involved with writing centers; those who have not directed such a place, worked there a minimum of 100 hours, or talked about their own writing there for 5 hours or more (433). And just as the film no doubt affected (however briefly) the image of English teachers in this country, I think the essay was reasonably effective for its audience: placed prominently in *College English*, it gave lots of essentially ignorant but well-meaning people pause. Tactically speaking, in other words, it worked pretty well.

Nevertheless, its more lasting impact has almost certainly been on us, on writing center people. More to the point here, it has come back—a highly visible version of our mythology, a public idealization—to haunt us in much the same way *Dead Poets Society* comes back to haunt us as English teachers. Indeed, the situation is probably worse with a document like “The Idea of a Writing Center.” We can at least partly free ourselves from having to perform

in the shadow of Robin Williams' John Keating by pointing out that we were not consulted about the script, and that we would never endorse the film's realism. By contrast, we are bound by "The Idea of a Writing Center" to the extent to which we have endorsed it: asked training tutors to read it, cited it in various writings or talks, used it in arguments with administrators, and so on. And there is plenty of evidence, I think, that we have indeed endorsed it—to good effect, often, and in ways that have provided me with moments of tremendous gratification—but also (therefore) in ways that make it harder for us to disown or renounce what may be its less desirable legacies.

So the primary object of this essay—the point of revisiting "The Idea of a Writing Center"—is to contribute in my own peculiar way to the work of reimagining of writing centers already well under way in such venues as *The Writing Center Journal* and *Writing Lab Newsletter* (see, e.g., Grimm, Woolbright, Joyner, and many others). To do that, I'm going to go behind the scenes, as it were, to critique and/or amend a selection of the public-directed images the essay offers, relying in particular on my sense of the lived experience of writing centers such images can be said to conceal. Specifically, I'm going to work from four passages, looking in particular at how they characterize three relationships: the tutor and the writer (passages 1 and 2); the tutor and the teacher (passage 2); and the tutor and the institution (passages 3 and 4, and combining, albeit somewhat awkwardly, such entities as the English department and larger administrative units). I'll then conclude by seeing what directions I think such amendments suggest for the future of writing centers.

A. Tutor and Writer

Passage 1:

Writers come looking for us because, more often than not, they are genuinely, deeply engaged with their material, anxious to wrestle it into the best form they can: they are really motivated to write. (443)

To test the face validity of this claim, I have read it on more than one occasion to a live audience of writing center people, and then paused. The reaction—to the passage, to the pause, to (likely) my raised eyebrows—is telling: people laugh. It isn't, of course, that the writers we see—students, for the most part—*aren't* motivated. They are. But not in the uncomplicated way this passage would suggest. They will, rather, be motivated to (say) finish writing; to be finished with writing; to have their writing be finished. They will be motivated to have the writing they submit for a class win them a good grade, whatever they imagine that will take: for it to be mechanically correct, or thoroughly documented, or to follow the instructor's directions to the letter. [Or, to invoke the most extreme example in my experience, they'll be motivated to satisfy the "sentence" imposed on them by the Student Conduct

Committee, which found them "guilty" of Plagiarism, Third Degree (unpremeditated).]

This isn't to be cynical about the possibilities for "genuine" or "deep" engagement. It is, rather, to contextualize such notions, to (re)situate them in the school culture, and indeed the larger culture, that this passage tends to erase. And it is to do so especially, in this case, for the sake of any number of tutors I have talked with—undergraduates, in particular—who, taking this passage pretty much at face value, tend to blame themselves (or, just as problematically, the writers they work with) when their tutorials don't seem to be so unproblematically driven. After all, it does come as a shock when, having been led by your training to expect some deep, unalloyed, genuine engagement—some eager wrestler-of-texts—you meet instead a frightened freshman who seems only to want a super proofreader; a sophomore who seems preoccupied by her fear that the instructor doesn't like her; a senior who seems concerned with doing just enough to pass an S/U course, but not a whit more; or any of the other very complicated, very human creatures who find their way to writing centers. This passage from "The Idea of a Writing Center," whatever its strategic value for other purposes, can lay an unnecessarily heavy burden on such tutors and such writers.

Passage 2:

Think of the writer writing as a kind of host setting. What we want to do in a writing center is fit into—observe and participate in—this ordinarily solo ritual of writing. To do this, we need to do what any participant-observer must do: see what happens during this "ritual," try to make sense of it, observe some more, revise our model, and so on indefinitely, all the time behaving in a way that the host finds acceptable. For validation and correction of our model, we quite naturally rely on the writer, who is, in turn, a willing collaborator in—and, usually, beneficiary of—the entire process. (439)

Sure (imagine a brogue here) and it's a charming image, this tutor of enormous restraint, endless curiosity, heightened sensitivities—antennae all atremble—selflessly and unobtrusively joining our unself-conscious freshman as she undertakes (deeply and genuinely engaged) her assignment to . . . oh, write a paper on some feature of "A Rose for Emily." Okay, so maybe she isn't so entirely unself-conscious; maybe we make her a little nervous. Okay, maybe she isn't entirely a willing collaborator; maybe she came because she got a C or D on an earlier assignment, or because the instructor insisted she come to the Writing Center. Okay, so maybe you were tired or busy or are habitually a little abrupt (I am in confessional mode now) and your greeting was something like "What is it!?"

Whatever Margaret Mead may have been doing all those years ago (if it

is, indeed, the Mead image of anthropology this invokes), and whatever conceptual leverage such an image provides (it was intended, obviously, to emphasize the centrality of the writer and her composing in the tutoring process), it too can offer a curious and troublesome legacy for tutors—especially new ones—who take it at anything like face value. On the one hand, it makes them feel handcuffed (or perhaps gagged): “I better sit here quietly, unobtrusively, not so much a coach or a consultant as a human recorder of some kind, committed above all to my belief in the intrinsic wholeness-as-writers of the people I tutor.” On the other, it tends to blind them to, or deny for them, the extent to which they are (always) already enmeshed in a system or systems—educational, political, economic, social, and so on—in ways that render such innocence (and I think that’s the right word) impossible. Think of it this way. It isn’t only—as might happen with the Mead-image anthropologist—that this low-profile participant-observer might carry into the visited environment a virus which proves dangerous, or even lethal, to the observed. In the (purportedly) analogous writing center situation, the performer-of-the-ritual is enticed (or coerced or whatever) to leave her usual scene of writing, and to perform it instead in . . . well, the analogy would lead me here to say “hospital,” and I’m reluctant to do that. But you see my point. Staging the tutorial in the writing center space—even if it is, as we would no doubt put it, for the writer’s good (and not merely, say, logistically convenient)—constitutes an alteration, not to say invasion, of this “ordinarily solo ritual” that no practiced tutorial (bedside) manner can overcome.

B. Tutor and teacher

Passage 3:

In all instances the student must understand that we support the teacher’s position completely. Or, to put it in less loaded terms—for we are not teacher advocates either—the instructor is simply part of the rhetorical context in which the writer is trying to operate. We cannot change that context: all we can do is help the writer learn how to operate in it and other contexts like it. In practice, this rule means that we never evaluate or second-guess any teacher’s syllabus, assignments, comments, or grades. If students are unclear about any of those, we send them back to the teacher to get clear. Even in those instances I mentioned above—where writers come in confused by what seem to be poorly designed assignments, or crushed by what appear to be unwarrantedly hostile comments—we pass no judgment, at least as far as the student is concerned. We simply try, every way we can, to help the writer make constructive sense of the situation. (441)

The language of this passage always makes me want to ask people to raise their right hand and recite it as a pledge: "I promise never ever to evaluate or second-guess any teacher's syllabus, assignments, comments, or grades" and then start a series of big-tent revivals for those who fail to scrupulously live up to such a pledge. I am, moreover, reminded of things I learned working in our writing center over the years: of one colleague, now retired, who used four different colors of ink in responding to student papers, always marked every feature he deemed worth commentary, *and* provided totals ("You have 64 separate errors in this paper, Mr. Johnson."). And then there was another, also now retired, who would not—as a matter of *policy*—talk with her students. Instead, she said, if they wanted to talk about their work, they could bring it to the Writing Center. Every year at Christmas time, though, she would send the Center a two-pound box of chocolates.

The fact is that, from the admittedly peculiar vantage point provided by our centers, we very often get to view our institutions—and especially *teaching* in our institutions—in the way that, say, the police or journalists get to view our larger communities: day in and day out, year in and year out, we see (and participate in) a range of teacher-student interactions very few other members of the institution can match. There are certainly delights and advantages to this, stories we can tell of commitment and learning and kindness and happy endings. But we also see what we at least construe as the seamier side of things—probably, again like the police and journalists, more of the seaminess than most other vantage points would provide. In any case, it adds up and in cumulative form puts a lot of pressure on the sort of tutor-teacher détente proposed by the passage quoted above. And it doesn't help in handling such pressure that, despite the gradual improvement of working conditions for writing center people, they still tend to be viewed as—or at least to *feel* that they are viewed as—lower in institutional pecking orders than the teachers whose practices the passage pledges them to uphold, especially when differentials in paychecks, workload, or job security reinforce such feelings.

C. Tutor and institution

Passage 4

I think . . . writing centers [can be] the centers of consciousness about writing on campuses, a kind of physical locus for the ideas and ideals of college or university or high school commitment to writing—a status to which they might well aspire and which, judging by results on a few campuses already, they can achieve. (446)

Of the four passages I've presented here, this one is likely both the most accurate and, at the same time, the most genuinely laughable. It is the most accurate because what was true when I first wrote those words would appear

to be even truer now. Many centers can, in fact, claim such a status, do serve their respective campuses as that institutional node to which primary responsibility for writing is ceded, both functionally and symbolically. They are responsible, then, not only for tutoring the “underprepared” student writers who have so often been understood to be their sole province, but—to offer a sample listing—for any writer, student or otherwise, interested in talking about his or her writing; for the direction and execution of writing-across-the-curriculum programs; for publishing student writing, faculty newsletters, and the like; for training T.A.s; for placement and assessment procedures; for research.

What makes this apparent success, this fulfillment of my essay’s prophecy, laughable—and I do apologize for the harshness of that term—are two factors: scale and image. The problems created by scale are, I think, fairly obvious. It may be that on smaller campuses a writing center can establish a tutor-to-student and staff-to-faculty ratio that makes these notions of a physical locus and a center of consciousness loosely plausible. There aren’t any magic formulas here, but suppose a campus of 1400 students and 25 full-time faculty has a center with 5 more or less full-time people (i.e., faculty members with part of their load in the center), and 15 undergraduate tutors. That represents 1-70 tutor-student and 1-5 staff-faculty ratios; people could, in fact, talk with and know one another.

As we move up the scale in institutional size, though, these ratios seem to get swamped pretty quickly. Our center, for example—of which I remain stubbornly proud—nevertheless has something like the staff I just described: six or seven more or less full-time people, and maybe fourteen undergraduate tutors. Unfortunately, our middle-sized research university enrolls some 16,000 students (12,000 undergraduate, 4000 graduate) and has in the neighborhood of 700 faculty (not to mention a raft of T.A.s, lecturers, and people teaching in various part-time capacities). The resulting ratios help explain, I hope, my use of the term laughable: 1-800 for tutor-student, 1-70 staff-faculty. If we are called upon to be this center of consciousness and physical locus—and, indeed, we are—the image that springs to mind comes from all those dinosaur books I read as a child (ignoring, for the moment, their paleontological accuracy): the university as this huge, lumbering stegosaurus, say, with a brain so physically small that it needs a second neural node just to operate its hindquarters; and for which “consciousness,” if it can be called that, seems to consist of little more than the awareness of a perpetual hunger, a visceral knowledge that the organism has grown so huge that it must be constantly about the work of eating simply to stay alive. (But imagine the size of the center if we wanted to preserve the ratios I offered above: it would require some 230 tutors, of whom 140 would have to be staff people! Our largest departments rarely reach 50.)

The problems presented by image may be even more acute, not least

because they can arise even where problems of scale are not so severe. Michael Pemberton, borrowing from Michel Foucault, has traced in the language of and about writing centers three of the more widely held representations: the center as hospital, prison, and madhouse. I would add to these, on a slightly more metaphysical plane—and as an alternative to the notion of a “center of consciousness”—the center as institutional *conscience*, that small nagging voice that ostensibly reminds the institution of its duties regarding writing. Whichever image one opts for, the point is essentially the same. Regardless of the commitment by a writing center staff to reforming the larger institution, the tendency seems not for the center to become the locus of any larger consciousness. On the contrary, there is a very strong tendency for it to become the place whose existence serves simultaneously to locate a wrongness (in this case, illiteracy, variously conceived) *in* a set of persons (and in that sense to constitute language differences *as* a wrong-ness); to absolve the institution from further consideration of such persons, in that they have now been named (“basic,” “remedial,” “developmental”) and “taken care of”; and, not incidentally, to thereby insulate the institution from any danger to its own configuration the differences such persons are now said to embody might otherwise pose. In short—and to put it in the most sinister terms—this particular romanticization of the writing center’s institutional potential may actually mask its complicity in what Elspeth Stuckey has called the violence of literacy.

* * * * *

So where does this critique of “The Idea of a Writing Center” leave me . . . or take us? In keeping with the less Keating-esque image I have been trying to move toward in this essay, I am obliged to confess (albeit with considerable relief) that institutional arrangements seem to me too idiosyncratic, and writing centers’ political visions too varied, for me to tell you where I think “we”—all writing center people—are going. But I *can* say where I’m hoping *our* writing center will head. I have to begin by explaining a bit about where our undergraduate writing program as a whole is heading. Specifically, we are no longer interested in moving each of our 2000 freshmen per year through a composition course or two. I have never had much faith in those courses as they were institutionalized at Albany (and, to be candid, elsewhere), i.e., understood as pre-college, or pre-disciplinary, literally extra-curricular, some sort of literacy inoculation program. It is common enough for people to claim that they want these courses—administrators, parents, faculty, legislators, etc.—but at least in my history with our particular institution (and from what I know of lots of others), *nobody ever wants to pay for them*, so that they have been and still are nearly always taught by the underpaid, the overworked, the undertrained (see, e.g., Connors, Miller).

So, no more. We don’t offer them. In their place, I favor—and we have now formally adopted—what an increasing number of other programs are

moving toward (see, e.g., Jenseth): a writing track through the English major, in this case one called “Writing: Rhetoric and Poetics,” which combines what used to be called (and isolated as) “composition,” “creative writing,” “expository writing,” “practical writing,” and so on. What we’re after is a long-term commitment founded primarily upon the full-time, tenure-track faculty the institution is *in fact* willing to support and a proportionate number of students. Together, this group of teachers and students will teach and learn writing over a four-year cycle of courses.

My amended idea of a writing *center*, then, runs along similar lines. The general ideal, perhaps, can still be said to hold. I believe—I want to say that I *know*—that an hour of talk about writing at the right time between the right people can be more valuable than a semester of mandatory class meetings when that timing isn’t right. But I no longer believe that our energies are really best applied trying to live up to—*real-ize*—the rather too grand “Idea” proposed in that earlier essay. I’ll frame my alternative proposal in terms of the points of critique above:

(1) I want a situation in which writers are, in fact, motivated about, engaged in, their writing because they are self-selectively enrolled in a program—a coherent, four-year sequence of study—that values writing. (It is crucial to note, however, that our Writing Sequence imposes no admission requirements. We will provide advisement—much of it in the Writing Center—so that students will, indeed, be able to make informed decisions about whether to enroll. But actual entrance is on a first-come, first-served basis, up to the limits of our resources.)

(2) I want a program in which we’ve gotten to know the writers and the writers have gotten to know us; a situation, in short, in which talk-about-writing is so common that we can, in fact, carry on such talk, get better at and even fluent in it—not fence, or be forever carrying on those quickie fix-it chats between people who talk twice for a total of an hour . . . and then never again.

(3) I want a situation in which we are *not* required to sustain some delicate but carefully distanced relationship between classroom teachers and the writing center, not least because the classroom teachers are directly involved with, and therefore invested in the functioning of, that center. I don’t want to substitute another idealization here by suggesting that the center constituted along these lines would achieve perfect harmony. Far from it: bringing center and classroom, teaching and tutoring, into this tighter orbit would surely generate as many new tensions as new opportunities, and I foresee plenty of stormy politics and raised voices. (Indeed, we’ve had them already, just in planning the program.) But at least these won’t be distant and delicate negotiations; students will play a much greater role in them; and the energy involved—for better and for worse (I’m willing to take my chances)—will return mostly to the center and to the program, and not be dissipated

throughout the bureaucratic structures of a large campus, where it has heretofore had little visible or (given the rate of personnel turnover) lasting effect. And if this seems like an attractive model—if other programs, other majors, other departments want to provide such centers for their students—I would urge them to follow the same principles.

(4) I want a situation in which the writing center's mission matches its resources and, to whatever extent possible, its image. Perhaps my favorite portion of the New Testament is the account of the loaves and fishes. So far as I've been able to tell, though, tutorial time does not extend to meet—let alone exceed—the needs of the faithful. Instead, in those all-too-common situations in which workload far exceeds resources, everyone—teachers, tutors, students—just gets weary. Moreover (to pursue the New Testament connection a little further), I do not believe it is finally a good thing for a writing center to be seen as taking upon its shoulders the whole institution's (real or imagined) sins of illiteracy, either: to serve as conscience, savior, or sacrificial victim.

For our purposes, the best way to create this situation is to tie the Center directly to our Writing Sequence through the English major: to make it the center of consciousness, the physical locus—not for the entire, lumbering university—but for the approximately 10 faculty members, the 20 graduate students, and the 250 or so undergraduates that we can actually, sanely, responsibly bring together. They can meet there, and talk about writing.

* * * * *

As I have tried to argue here, images of the kind offered in *Dead Poets Society* and "The Idea of a Writing Center" can be wonderfully inspiring, but they can outlive their usefulness, too, and come back to haunt us: mislead us, delude us or, as seems to be particularly the case in these two instances, lock us into trajectories which—should we persist in following them—are likely to take us places that we don't really want to go. At the end of the Williams film, you may recall, his Keating character has been fired, made the scapegoat for the suicide of a student who, acting on Keating's advice, played Puck in a local production against his father's vehemently expressed opposition. In the final scene—set appropriately in the English classroom, where Keating has been replaced by the repressive headmaster who engineered his dismissal—Keating has come to collect his belongings. As the class carries on (a student is reading aloud the excised Introduction to Poetry by J. Evans Pritchard), Keating walks, visibly dejected, past the rows of desks toward the back of the room. Just as he reaches the doorway, though, his shyest defender finally cries out at the injustice of it all: he is sorry, he declares, and it isn't fair; the students were forced to sign the statement that led to Keating's dismissal. Ordered to silence by the outraged headmaster, the lad instead climbs atop his desk and chants, with all sorts of poignant resonance, "Oh

captain, my captain.” Soon other boys, one by one, climb atop their desks, too, and pick up the chant. Keating stands in the doorway drinking in this tribute until, visibly heartened, he finally thanks his young men and then, head high, leaves Welton forever.

It’s a wonderful cinematic moment, to be sure—nary a dry eye in the house—and not least because it arrives with such tragic and symmetrical inevitability: Keating has been headed unerringly toward it since we first saw him make that same walk, whistling Tchaikovsky, a latter-day Pied Piper. As the finishing touch on the film’s image of the English teacher, however, it is rather more problematic. I mean, what’s the message? That the inevitable fate of the truly talented, truly in-tune, truly committed English teacher—indeed, the litmus test of that commitment—is a kind of institutional martyrdom? Which means, in turn, that those of us who (like the repressive headmaster) stay on are . . . what, exactly?

The trajectory plotted by “The Idea of a Writing Center” may be less tragic in a technical sense, in that it does not require that the protagonist be expelled. Nevertheless, it threatens to lead just as surely to an analogous brand of institutional martyrdom—a version of what Susan Miller has so aptly termed the “sad women in the basement” (121 ff.) (or, in the case of writing centers, the sub-basement)—and, perhaps more to the point, to create just as powerful a tactical disadvantage: that is, agreeing to serve as the (universal) staff literacy scapegoat gives us no more power to alter what we believe are flawed institutional arrangements than Keating’s departure gives him to affect Welton, and indeed lacks even the short-term power of his grand gesture.

Of course, where we *do* have the advantage over Keating is in still being able to alter that trajectory, to rewrite the script. As I suggested earlier, the amended idea of a writing center I have recommended here will by no means guarantee a happy ending. On the contrary: while this fairly radical restructuring of both writing curriculum and writing center will certainly address some very important problems of writing program life, it will likely also both intensify any number of extant difficulties *and* produce new ones, as-yet unforeseen byproducts of these alternative institutional arrangements. Nevertheless, I believe that it represents a crucial move—albeit a somewhat hard-nosed one—in our long-term campaign to renegotiate the place of writing in post-secondary education.

Notes

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Steve North is Associate Professor of English at the University at Albany. His current administrative title is Coordinator of the Writing Sequence Through the English Major, which means he is launching a new program for undergraduates called Writing: Rhetoric and Poetics. His major research interest is exploring the role of writing in English graduate education, with special attention to its uses in Albany's Ph.D. program, "Writing, Teaching, Criticism."