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## The Writing Center as Site for Cross-Language Research<sup>1</sup>

*Carol Severino*

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The debate about what writing center research is, what its purpose should be, and whom it should serve remains unresolved. A review of the conversation reveals a range of designs for writing center research—from the complex simulation study of tutorial interaction recommended by Stephen North, to the pro-active directorial and pedagogical practices described by Joan Mullin on the WCENTER e-mail network. Thus, at times writing center research sounds like the kind of educational research found in publications of the American Educational Research Association; other times it sounds more like creative administration and teaching. In addition, evaluations of our progress vary widely. We are either not doing enough research (North), or we are doing it unknowingly: “You are probably already engaged in the collection of research data but perhaps didn’t know it” (Kail and Allen 235). Those who believe we are not doing enough gently admonish one other for not taking enough initiative or for not having discovered a “research paradigm” (North 27). The polite scolding is then followed by a threat: “By 1995, we will either have some answers—or we won’t be around to need them” (North 33).

At the first National Writing Centers Association Conference in April, 1994, we repeatedly said and heard that writing center research should not merely justify the center’s existence to administrators. That kind of research, which North calls “reflections on experience” (25), sounds not so much like educational research or creative administration, but more like responsible record keeping. Yet neither should writing center research merely justify our *own* professional existences, what Cynthia Haynes-Burton calls the “appro-

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priation” of writing centers for “self-interested” research (116-117). Some say that writing center research should serve composition studies (Bushman; North; Brannon). Others say that it must distinguish itself from composition; they maintain that writing center issues, such as writing across the curriculum and student retention, concern other departments and administrative units as much as or more than they do English departments and composition studies (Simpson; Maid). This latter camp is less concerned with writing centers being “at the heart of rather than the periphery of current theory in composition studies” (Ede 5-6), and more concerned with writing centers improving the quality of higher education by serving colleges as a whole. However, when writing center research aims to provide better service to institutions and disciplines by finding better ways to help students fit into them, it is challenged by those who see writing center research as an instrument for social and institutional change (Grimm, “Contesting”). According to Nancy Grimm, writing center research should result in changing curricula and pedagogy rather than changing students to fit policies and practices of the status quo (“Divided Selves”).

Frequently offered in response to complaints that centers are too busy tutoring and teaching to do research is the recommendation that writing centers scale down, lower their sights, and perform research with a small “r” rather than research with a capital “R”—research that is more appropriate to the center’s scarce resources of time, money, and energy (Bushman). We should focus on the practical, the everyday; we should study the tutorial relationship. Yet most of us remain confused about what qualities distinguish big R from little r research. I had assumed that Research meant large experimental/control group studies until I came across a definition of Research as that which focuses on distant, theoretical concerns as opposed to practical tutoring concerns (Brannon, quoted in Bushman). When I recalled how quickly WCENTER discussions of everyday matters climb the ladder of abstraction and, as North says, get “real big real fast” (Harris and Kincaid 10), I again wondered what factors distinguish the practical/everyday from the theoretical/distant. For example, is the question of why more women than men are attracted to writing center work practical or theoretical? What about the question of which tutoring situations lend themselves better to directive than to nondirective strategies? What begins as a practical nuts-and-bolts question soon launches into the heady realms of feminist and cognitive theories (Trachsel).

My intent here is not to overproblematize how we categorize research, but to offer a compromise proposal that satisfies both those who argue that writing center research should serve the composition field and those who say it should go beyond (or beside) it to serve other disciplines as well and the institution at large. In this case, I am advocating a relationship with Applied Linguistics/ESL, a field that is also concerned with the study and teaching of

writing, but that offers those of us in native-language composition some perspectives that are both seasoned and fresh. Such a relationship, I argue, fosters small r research grounded in the everyday work of the center, but with large R cultural and theoretical implications.

I propose that writing centers begin to research cross-cultural and cross-linguistic questions—in short, a multicultural “research paradigm.” Most writing centers are well positioned to do research on first and second language interaction because they are used by so many ESL students and because, as North and Kail and Allen point out, one-on-one work is well suited to case study investigation.

The writing center has the potential to become a truly multicultural, twenty-first century research site where first language writing (composition) and second language writing (ESL) research intersect, each enriching the other with its strengths. These two fields have stood too far apart for too long, each with its own research agendas and methods, its own journals and conferences. Even the labels we use—L1 for first language composition and L2 for second language—convenient as they are, serve to perpetuate our isolation from one another. Because the writing center serves both the L1 and L2 populations, one of few sites on campus where both groups speak and write with one another, it is the natural and logical place for bringing the two fields together.

In an article in *Written Communication*, most of whose readers are from L1 composition, Guadalupe Valdez depicts the present relationship between the L1 and L2 communities as non-intersecting circles, neither of which includes the bilingual writer, who is neither L1 or L2. Similarly, in an article in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, which few in the L1 community have seen, Terry Santos portrays the L1 and L2 communities almost as opposites in terms of their ideologies and cultures. She characterizes the L1 native language composition community, from which most of us who work in writing centers hail, as politically aware, citing the leftist-oriented work of James Berlin and Patricia Bizzell, as well as Maxine Hairston, who criticizes that leftist political orientation. In contrast, Santos portrays the L2 community as down-to-earth, practical, non-, or apolitical, pragmatically preoccupied with helping ESL students acquire the language resources they need to survive in the host country’s academic programs.

In a subsequent article in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, I question Santos’ portrayal of the L1/L2 situation, claiming that ESL teaching and learning abound with political implications, some more obvious, some more hidden, all of which need to be brought out in the open and discussed. I also suggest that through writing center research, the L1 and L2 communities can intersect, collaborate, and benefit from one another’s traits. In other words, the respective theoretical and practical characteristics of each community would positively affect the other; L1 would become more

practical, L2 more politically aware. The writing center could be where the two communities intersect; metaphorically, it would be the church or temple where the marriage of L1 and L2 takes place.

As Ilona Leki and Tony Silva, editors of the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, recommend, L1 composition can benefit from some of L2's theoretical concepts and its research questions. For example, we can study the similarities and differences between "language learning" and "language acquisition" and use both concepts to create developmentally-based assignment sequences for both L1 and L2 students in writing courses and writing centers that use a curriculum. The L1 community has much to gain from conceptualizing the process of learning to write as learning a second language (Leki, "Broadening"). For example, the concepts of "transfer" and "translation" can be applied to L1 as well as to L2 students. If oral language is thought of as a first language, then writers translate from this language into the written one, transferring features of their spoken language to their writing in a way similar to how English-speaking writers transfer features of English to a second language. Such transfer can be both positive and enabling, resulting, say, in a distinctive "voice," or negative and confusing, resulting in fragmented ideas whose presentation assumes that the reader as "co-speaker" will supply the missing context or content. "Fossilization" or ingrained language patterns, whether they are patterns of error or clichéd expressions, also occur in L1 writing, especially if the motivation to change or break these patterns is not strong (Leki, "Broadening").

L1 composition could also learn from L2 the dangers of basing most of its analyses, critiques, and theories on studies of monolingual native speakers of English, especially eighteen-year-old college students (Silva). How can our politically-aware L1 community be so narrow in its research focus and choice of subjects? After all, most of the world speaks more than one language; monolingual English speakers are in the minority. Writing center research would be based on a motto similar to that of the Iowa Foreign Language Association: "Monolingualism can be cured." By the same token, the L2 community could become more aware of the political implications of its curricula, in fact, of its own existence. What does it mean that English is taking over as the power and cash language of the world, that the sun never sets on ESL and EFL programs?

One way to bring the L1 and L2 fields together is to research how first and second languages interact. What kinds of linguistic and cultural transfer occur in moving from one language to the other? A related topic is the field of contrastive rhetoric—the study of the discourse patterns and features of writers of different language backgrounds and cultures. Notice that L1 and L2 writing share a same ancestor—rhetoric—a common rootedness that is very promising for writing center research. This means both fields are already equipped to address the same questions about purpose and audience: How

do different cultural groups vary in the purposes for which they use language, especially writing? How do they vary in the way they relate to audiences, the way they convey “persona” to readers and listeners? (And is the idea of a “persona” limited to Western rhetoric? What are the related concepts in other cultures?) These are huge questions, already addressed to a limited extent by anthropology, communication studies, and linguistics, which may not be directly concerned with pedagogy; but both L1 and L2 language research have always claimed to be interdisciplinary and willing to draw from those fields.

L1 and L2 collaboration in the writing center offers methodological cross-overs that are as exciting as the disciplinary ones. Contrastive rhetoric began with the work of Robert Kaplan, whose research methods, though grounded in a long and rich experience of teaching and inquiry, were observational and somewhat impressionistic and his research stance English-centered and somewhat ethnocentric. Possibly overreacting to Kaplan’s controversial examples selected to illustrate contrastive rhetoric patterns, possibly overcompensating for his qualitative methods of forming generalizations about texts and cultures, many contrastive rhetoricians performed extremely complicated discourse analyses, with quantitative results reported in elaborate statistical charts. (See some of the studies in the Connor/Kaplan and Purves collections.) However, some of these discourse analyses, although analytically complex, were still ethnocentrically based, grounded in Western views of rhetoric. For example, one study involved training Americans to rate essays written by students of different nationalities. The raters had to categorize and count the essays’ ethical, logical, and pathetic appeals and then use these totals as a scale for evaluation purposes. Another study used an Anglo-Saxon “Once upon a time” model of an “ideal” story to rate the stories of children of different language backgrounds.

Using Aristotelian appeals or a Western fairy tale structure as measuring sticks to analyze and evaluate Western and non-Western writing, even the very function of rating students from one culture against another, seems to contradict the very premise of contrastive rhetoric—the relativity of rhetorics—i.e., that every rhetoric is appropriate to the needs of a particular culture; that Western rhetoric, often characterized by deduction and tight reasoning from premises to conclusions, is not necessarily *better* than other rhetorics that present less linear, more loosely organized clusters of ideas. Contrastive rhetoric could benefit from the political awareness of L1 or L2 researchers who would say, “Wait a minute, these methods contradict the premises and values upon which the field is based.” The contrastive rhetoric studies of Joanne Liebman, an L1 scholar who “crossed over” to L2, provide better models for writing center research because they are informed by rhetorical relativity and involve student inquiry into rhetorical differences.

Research on contrastive rhetoric can also benefit from methods that have

led to knowledge-making in L1 composition studies, especially the instruments and techniques of the case study: interviews, surveys, self-report inventories, video and audio taping, and field notes (see Merriam). The writing center is not only the perfect site for L1 and L2 collaboration, but also, as we have learned from the work of Ann DiPardo and Nancy Welch, the perfect site for the case study, especially when students make repeat visits and work on long-term projects, or when centers, like those at the University of Iowa and Nebraska, operate on an enrollment rather than drop-in basis. The tutor's sustained attention to individual students can be translated into case-study teacher-research, inquiry that occurs jointly with students' consent and benefits them academically and personally. These conditions must be present for the research to be reciprocal, not just a professional advantage for the tutor and possibly at the expense of the students' time and effort (Haynes-Burton).

For example, one on-going writing center contrastive rhetoric project involves international students responding to an assignment in which they report on and analyze their native language writing instruction and experiences as well as the differences they have perceived between writing for a U.S. teacher and writing for a teacher in their native country. These ESL students' responses are used for complementary research purposes: 1) a large R research purpose—to problematize Kaplan's diagrams representing the rhetorics of different cultures (see Severino, "Kaplan's 'Doodles'"), and 2) a small r teaching and learning purpose—to guide students' academic work. It is important for tutors to know and for students to articulate their native-language experiences with personal narratives, research reports, or five-paragraph-type structures before they begin to write papers for courses in different disciplines. Likewise, it is equally important for native speakers and their tutors to investigate and articulate their reading and writing histories with different discourses, genres, and rhetorics; with such background information, tutors can help writers "translate" from one discipline's discourse to another's. For example, for both L1 and L2 writers, which features of expressive discourse or of discourses about history can "transfer" positively into a literary analysis?

Other research topics that writing center language interaction studies can address are the following, borrowed directly from an L2 research agenda (see Leki, *Understanding ESL Writers*):

1) *The role of translation in second language writing.* How enabling or crippling is writing on a topic first in the native language and then translating into English? Does successful use of the native language as precursor to second language writing vary with the individual student? With the particular language? With the topic? At what stages in the composing process is translation most effective? Do translations lead to greater syntactic complexity? Do writers less fluent in English benefit more from translation

(Kobayashi and Rinnert)? How much do native-English speaking writers translate from their oral language and in which drafts? Is their freewriting similar to their spoken voice?

2) *The role of topic itself and whether the experience the student is writing about occurred in the first or second language.* Alexander Friedlander's study suggests that if the event happened in the second language, it is easier to write about in the second language, whereas experiences that occurred in the first language will cause writing difficulties in the second language. The same situation exists for native speakers of English, Leki suggests ("Broadening"). If the experience is stored in oral language, the writer is, in effect, translating, and a narrative task becomes more difficult than we previously thought. Projects about narrative and the perception of past experience through language appeal to L1 composition and writing center researchers and are especially suited to case-study investigation.

3) *The appropriateness of interlanguage structures.* In what rhetorical academic and non-academic situations are first-language influenced, oral-language-influenced, or nonidiomatic forms of English acceptable? Because so many ESL students write in the sciences, is scientific writing becoming more tolerant of first-language-influenced phrasing and organizational patterns (see Severino, "Inadvertently")? For example, in what situations are the "set-phrases" translated from Chinese effective (Wong)? In general, is academic writing becoming less formal and more tolerant of an oral-language-influenced personal voice?

4) *Difficulties with word choice.* Leki describes how ESL students repeatedly revise their word choices, going back and forth between two lexical options, both of which might lack resonance for them. A native English speaker with a weak vocabulary might experience the same frustration. Leki describes how the struggle to choose the right vocabulary is "in the dark . . . hidden from the teacher" (*Understanding* 80), yet in the writing center, through one-on-one contact and the case study, this struggle would be openly communicated so both teacher and student—and eventually the L1, L2, and writing center communities—could learn from it and lessen what Ann Raimes calls "anguish as a second language."

5) *Difficulties with direct, explicit, tightly organized writing.* Who exactly are those writers who have problems with this style of rhetoric? What are the demographic and personality characteristics and the literacy backgrounds of both the native and non-native speakers who balk at top-down patterns? We should stop pointing to Asian students as if they are the only ones who resist linear, hierarchically arranged prose (Leki, "Cross-Talk"). As we now know, many poets, essayists, women, and speakers and writers of diverse U.S. ethnic groups, both native-English-speaking and native-Spanish-speaking, resist this style for various reasons that are worth discovering through our research. For example, Arnetha Ball's study showed that African-American high school



students resist tightly organized forms and prefer looser clusters of ideas for cultural and political reasons possibly related to the expression of an oppositional identity. Marcia Farr's study showed that Mexicanos in their speech prefer forms other than what she calls "essayist literacy," which appeals more to the more assimilated Mexican Americans.

Addressing issues like these will promote a cross-fertilization that brings the L1 and L2 communities together for common purposes rooted in rhetoric, a common ancestor. At the same time, such inquiries constitute a research paradigm that will help resolve some of the debate and confusion about the nature and purpose of writing center research and whom it should serve. Cross-language inquiry is one kind of writing center research that serves not only L1 composition studies and L2/ESL, but also L1 and L2 college students and their institutions.

### Notes

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