Really Useful Knowledge: A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers

Marilyn M. Cooper

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People—not just my students—often tell me that as a writing teacher, I am “different” (if they’re being polite) or “crazy” or “bizarre” (if they’re being frank). I believe students should be intellectually challenged in their writing classes, that they need to be engaged in a struggle over complex ideas that matter to them. I give them hard books to read, I ask them hard questions, I ask them to make up their own assignments. I believe that college students are completely capable of reading hard books and writing in interesting ways. I also know that they often don’t believe that, and that they have faced a variety of obstacles that have taught them that they are “bad” or “nonstandard” or (what is sometimes worse) “good” writers. Changing their attitude toward writing and their understanding of what it means to write well is a long and difficult task, not to be achieved in one or two classes or by a single teacher. So as a writing teacher I see writing centers as essential places where students can go to continue the conversations about ideas begun in class and in electronic conferences, to find people they can complain to, to work out solutions to the problems they face in their writing, to find a friend and a colleague and an advocate—all of those things I cannot really be for them. But because I have also worked with the writing center research group at MTU and am now directing dissertations by a number of graduate students who are doing research in the writing center, I also see writing centers as a site of a great deal of exciting research, a site where we can really begin to see what goes on with students’ writing and what keeps them from writing.

The question I have already begun to answer—what is the function of writing centers? or, as it is alternatively framed, what is the role of the writing
center tutor or coach or consultant in teaching writing?—is, I would venture
to say, the central concern of recent discussions of writing centers. In fact,
the ongoing discussion over what to call writing center tutors is a good
demonstration of the centrality of this concern. I want to align myself with
certain answers to this question: that writing centers are in a good position
to serve as a site of critique of the institutionalized structure of writing
instruction in college, and that, as a consequence of this, the role of the tutor
should be to create useful knowledge about writing in college and to empower
students as writers who also understand what writing involves and who act
as agents in their writing—these two goals being closely intertwined. Since
I know that writing centers vary a lot from site to site, I should say at the outset
that I am thinking primarily about writing centers that are staffed by
undergraduate students and that allow students to work over a period of time
with a single tutor, although I believe that all types of writing centers and all
kinds of tutors can have the function and role I describe. I should also say that
my ideas about these questions have been most heavily influenced by Nancy
Grimm, who directs the writing center at Michigan Tech and who has
written very directly about a critical role for writing centers. Nancy says,
"Writing centers are places where students struggle to connect their public
and private lives, and where they learn that success in the academy depends
on uncovering and understanding tacit differences in value systems and
expectations" (5). In this struggle, students and their tutors come to know
a lot about the real situation of college writing.

What I want to do here is to develop a rationale for thinking of writing
centers as having the essential function of critiquing institutions and creating
knowledge about writing, a rationale that will make clear the politics of such
a belief and that will connect the goal of inquiry with the daily practice of
writing center tutors. This rationale also will have clear implications for what
tutors should know and how they should be trained. But I'd like to start by
suggesting why it is useful to think of writing centers in this way by looking
closely at some advice on tutoring offered by Jeff Brooks in his article on
minimalist tutoring that came out in 1991 in the Writing Lab Newsletter.

I chose Brooks' article because it has been widely admired and because
it enunciates very clearly some oft-heard advice for tutors. I also like a great
deal of what he suggests, particularly his emphasis on tutors' responsiveness
to students and on students as active writers. He argues that tutors should
not be in the business of "fixing" student papers but rather should focus on
students as writers, offering them strategies and support and encouraging
them to fix their own papers; he says, "The student, not the tutor, should
'save' the paper and take full responsibility for it. The tutor should take on
a secondary role, serving mainly to keep the student focused on his own
writing" (2). He goes on to suggest how this principle can be implemented,
pointing out that "The primary value of the writing center tutor to the
student is as a living human body who is willing to sit patiently and help the
student spend time with her paper" (2). He offers a list of "ways we can put theory into practice" (3) and concludes, "If, at the end of the session, a paper is improved, it should be because the student did all the work" (4).

Perhaps because I am "outside" the writing center culture, I did also find a couple of things odd in Brooks' suggestions. For one thing, almost all of his specific suggestions involve tactics designed to distance tutors from students' papers in order to "establish the student as sole owner of the paper and [the tutor] as merely an interested outsider" (4). I worry about the notion of students' owning papers, and this worry connects with the other thing I find odd in Brooks' suggestions: the focus on improving individual student papers. Brooks repeatedly asserts that in writing center sessions tutors are not to focus on papers but instead on students and on their writing. But students are still expected to focus on their papers, and thus their individual papers remain the focus of writing center sessions.

Now, of course, in some ways this is not odd: students overwhelmingly show up at writing centers to get help with particular papers and particular assignments, and it would be incredibly perverse for writing center tutors simply to refuse to respond to this very real need. At the same time, it is not obvious to me—even though classroom teachers often believe this—that helping students fix papers is or should be the central purpose of writing centers, and I expect many of you agree with me on this. But I also think that it is this assumption that writing center sessions must focus on improving individual papers that leads to the trap Brooks describes, the trap of tutors serving as editors of student papers, and that leads to his emphasizing negative tactics that help tutors to refuse that role.

When writing center sessions remain resolutely focused on how a student can fix a paper, it is difficult for tutors to focus instead on what students know and need to know about writing. In such sessions, tutors can find little to do other than directly fix papers, indirectly show students how to fix papers, or simply abdicate all responsibility for mistakes in papers. Though Brooks asserts that "we forget that students write to learn, not to make perfect papers," he remains fixated on the notion of perfection in student texts: "student writing . . . has no real goal beyond getting it on the page," he says, and, "Most students simply do not have the skill, experience, or talent to write the perfect paper" (3). Given these assumptions, it is not at all surprising that, as Brooks says, "writing papers is a dull and unrewarding activity for most students" (2). Nor do I think that, in this situation, simply insisting that students take responsibility for their papers and treat them as valuable will either change their attitude toward writing in college or help them learn much about writing.

In order to make my point, I've emphasized how Brooks' suggestions lead to a focus on fixing student papers. But clearly, other things besides editing for effectiveness and correctness go on in the kind of writing center sessions he is talking about. Tutors help students learn processes of writing.
by helping them figure out what an assignment asks them to do or by helping
them brainstorm in response to assignments. By asking students, “What do
you mean by this?” tutors help students learn that readers often need more
information or explanation in order to understand what writers had in mind.
By asking students, “What’s your reason for putting Q before N?” and similar
questions, tutors help students learn to think about the decisions they make
in writing as reasonable rather than simply a matter of following rules. By
asking students to read final drafts aloud in order to find mistakes, tutors help
students learn that they can correct many of their own mistakes. As long as
students understand that it is what they are learning about writing in these
activities that is important, not that their papers are being improved, these are
useful things to do.

This, of course, is the position advocated by Stephen North in the axiom
which has become a writing center mantra: “Our job is to produce better
writers, not better writing.” North explains,

Any given project—a class assignment, a law school application, an
encyclopedia entry, a dissertation proposal—is for the writer the
prime, often the exclusive concern. That particular text, its success
or failure, is what brings them to talk to us in the first place. In the
center, though, we look beyond or through that particular project,
that particular text, and see it as an occasion for addressing our
primary concern, the process by which it is produced. (438)

In other words, tutors can use the situation of students writing particular
to focus on what students know and need to know about college
writing. Brooks certainly has activities like this in mind when he suggests that
tutors have better things to do with their time than to edit student papers,
when he says that “we sit down with imperfect papers, but our job is to
improve their writers” (2). But North’s formulation of this position also
makes clear how the goals of students and tutors can conflict: students come
for help in making their document perfect (for very good reasons, like getting
into law school, getting their dissertation proposal approved, passing the
course and getting their degree) and are confronted with tutors who have
their own primary concern, a concern with the process of writing. In this
situation, I think that tutors must not only make clear what their concern in
tutoring sessions is but also explain why they think this concern should be
primary for students as well, and they must negotiate a common goal in their
sessions, one that does not simply ignore the students’ concerns. If tutors are
not up front about their concerns, they risk losing track of them as they strive
to help students or frustrating and confusing students with their
uncooperativeness—both of these reactions seem inevitable in the kind of
minimalist tutoring Brooks describes.

At the same time, in spite of the problems I see in Brooks’ suggestions for
minimalist tutoring, I think he is reaching for a purpose for writing centers
beyond that enunciated by North. Brooks wants students to get more from writing center sessions than just instruction in how to write well. In his insistence that “we need to make the student the primary agent in the writing center session” (2) and that “ideally the student should be the only active agent in improving the paper” (4), I hear the desire to empower students as agents that has characterized many recent calls for reforms in writing pedagogy. It is a desire I heartily endorse, but also one that has turned out to be decidedly difficult to enact. One of the difficulties in implementing this goal arises, as Lester Faigley has pointed out, from the strong rationalist and expressivist traditions in composition studies that encourage us to see agency in writing as Brooks does in his article, in terms of owning or taking responsibility for a text. These are the same traditions Andrea Lunsford sees operating to produce the notions of the writing center as a storehouse of positivistic knowledge or as a garret where individual students get in touch with their genius.

As Lunsford points out, both traditions “tend to view knowledge as individually derived” (4), and, as Faigley points out, both traditions deny “the role of language in constructing selves” (128). For both rationalists and expressivists, knowledge and writing are dependent on a preexisting coherent and rational self. Given this assumption, agency in writing becomes a matter of subduing the text to the self by achieving personal control over it, either by creating in it a rational and coherent point of view on the topic addressed, a point of view that is dependent on the rational and coherent self of the writer, or by expressing one’s personal vision or true self in it—often referred to as achieving an authentic voice. Unfortunately, as the modern world taught us that selves (or, as we learned to call them, subject positions) are constantly in the process of construction and that one of the activities that contributes most to the construction of subject positions is language use (including writing), we came to understand that writers cannot and do not achieve agency in writing by subduing language to their selves but rather by using language to construct subject positions. Agency in writing depends not on owning or taking responsibility for a text but on understanding how to construct subject positions in texts. From Brooks’ point of view, it is ironic, then, that what this comes down to is that tutors can best help students become agents of their own writing by helping them understand how and the extent to which they are not owners of their texts and not responsible for the shape of their texts, by helping them understand, in short, how various institutional forces impinge on how and what they write and how they can negotiate a place for their own goals and needs when faced with these forces.

Students know that they don’t own their texts only too well, and tutors know it too, but the overwhelming discourse in textbooks, classroom advice, training materials for teachers and tutors, and in much of the scholarship and research in composition studies on the importance of individual control in
producing writing works to obscure this fact and to keep both students and tutors from realizing what they know. In her *Writing Center Journal* article, Nancy Welch observes,

> my work in the writing center at a large public university has also introduced me to students who arrive at the center already aware, sometimes painfully so, that their meanings are contested and that their words are populated with competing, contradictory voices. . . . Even alone, these students write with and against a cacophony of voices, collaborating not with another person but with the Otherness of their words. (4)

Students and tutors who are outside mainstream culture are usually more aware of the way language coerces them, but all students and tutors know how institutions coerce them in writing classes. They know that students in writing classes are offered and can exercise little or no control over such things as the topic or genre of their papers, the argument structure or organization of their papers, the length of their papers, and the style or register of language in their papers. Students know that in order to get a good grade they must carefully follow assignments that specify these things, and tutors are advised explicitly not to criticize or in any way try to subvert teachers' assignments. Students and tutors respond—quite rationally—by trying to make the papers match as perfectly as possible the specifications of assignments while at the same time—quite irrationally—trying to believe that in doing this students are asserting ownership over their texts and learning to write. Meg Woolbright says, "In thinking one thing and saying another, the tutor is subverting the conflict she feels" (23); she is not being honest, and thus she subverts her chances of establishing egalitarian conversations with her students and alienates both herself and them (28-9).

But if tutors need to help students—and themselves—realize that what they know about institutional constraints is true and important, they also need to help students understand that if they are to achieve agency in writing, they must learn how to challenge these constraints productively in the service of their own goals and needs. Agency in writing is not a matter of simply taking up the subject positions offered by assignments but of actively constructing subject positions that negotiate between institutional demands and individual needs. In his discussion of what cultural studies offers to teachers of writing, John Trimbur explains that "one of the central tasks that [cultural studies] sets for radical intellectuals is to point out the relatively autonomous areas of public and private life where human agency can mediate between the material conditions of the dominant order and the lived experience and aspirations of the popular masses" (9). Because writing assignments, no matter how tightly specified, require the active participation of human agents, they offer relatively autonomous spaces in which the institutional constraints on relatively autonomous spaces in which the institutional constraints on writing imposed by the dominant order can be made to respond to the lived experience and aspirations of students.
If tutors want to help students develop agency in writing, they need to cast themselves as radical intellectuals who help students find and negotiate these spaces. Such tutors cannot, as Stephen North advises them to do, simply help students operate within the existing context without trying to change it. And, yes, I am thinking about undergraduate tutors, whose cogent critiques of assignments often leak out in writing center sessions even when they don’t make them explicit. Furthermore, in helping students become agents of their own writing, tutors also become agents of change in writing pedagogy, helping teachers create better assignments, letting teachers know what students are having trouble with. As intellectuals, tutors contribute both to the endeavor of helping students learn about writing and to the endeavor of creating useful knowledge about writing. Speaking of what tutors can learn and how they can affect writing pedagogy, Nancy Grimm says,

Our excursions into students’ heads, like our excursions into films and novels, change the way we see and the way we act and the way we think and the way we teach. Our promise to support the teachers’ position completely prevents us from sharing these altered perspectives that can in turn change the rhetorical context of teaching. In a writing center, one discovers how smart students are and how arbitrary and limiting linguistic conventions and educational hierarchies can be. (6)

And, I want to argue, it is in a writing center that one discovers how the goal of empowering students as agents of their writing can actually be achieved, for writing center tutors, by virtue of their constant contact with institutional constraints and with students’ lived experiences, are best positioned to serve as what Trimbur calls radical intellectuals, or what Gramsci calls organic intellectuals.

In order for you to better understand why I believe that the goal of empowering students can best be achieved in a writing center and why tutors are more likely to be organic intellectuals than are classroom teachers of writing, I now want to explain the rationale that underlies my argument. To do so, I will draw on some theories that are connected with work in cultural studies and especially on the ideas of a theorist who has arguably had the most influence on cultural studies, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci’s work has also heavily influenced Paulo Freire, and recently we have begun to see some direct influences of Gramsci in composition studies. As a member of the Communist Party in Italy, Gramsci was arrested by Mussolini in 1924. In his trial, the prosecutor claimed, “We must stop this brain working for twenty years!” But, during the eight years he spent in prison, Gramsci wrote 2,848 pages in thirty-two notebooks, working out his theories of how social groups gain legitimacy and power, how political change comes about, and, most importantly for us as writing teachers, what role intellectuals and education play in this process.
Gramsci argues that the function of education in a democratic society is to produce intellectuals, for "democracy, by definition, cannot mean merely that an unskilled worker can become skilled. It must mean that every 'citizen' can 'govern' and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this" (40). According to Gramsci, everyone is on some level and potentially an intellectual:

each man . . . carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a "philosopher," an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought. (9)

Thus, intellectuals are produced not by "introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but [by] renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity" (330-31). According to Gramsci, intellectuals become intellectuals not by virtue of any inherent qualifications but by virtue of their efforts to elaborate critically and systematically the philosophy of their social group.

When a social group becomes well established and dominant, its intellectuals often come to see what they do as valuable in and of itself and see themselves as somehow specially qualified for intellectual activities; they lose sight of how their activities function primarily to further the goals of their particular social group. These intellectuals are what Gramsci calls traditional intellectuals, intellectuals who because of their tenure as the intellectuals of a successful and powerful social group come to see themselves as “autonomous and independent of the dominant social group” (7). A second characteristic of traditional intellectuals is that they are the apologists for a dominant group whose vision is failing, whose ideas are no longer productive in a changing society. In his recent article on Gramsci in Pre/Text, Victor Villanueva offers E. D. Hirsch as a good example of an American traditional intellectual, an apologist for the status quo whose recommendations for instilling cultural literacy in all students, though well intentioned, are neither disinterested nor progressive, but rather serve the interests of an established but increasingly discredited elite.

Traditional intellectuals are no longer agents of change in a society for these two reasons: they have lost contact with the purposes and goals of the group whose philosophy they represent, and they serve, although often unknowingly, the status quo. Organic intellectuals, in contrast, are those intellectuals who understand that their function as intellectuals derives from their involvement in the work and the purposes of their social group. Furthermore, they are the intellectuals of an emergent social group, one which is not yet dominant but whose vision is more directly responsive to the current historical conditions of the society than that of the dominant group,
whose vision developed out of past historical conditions. Organic intellectuals exemplify the basic marxist postulate of the unity of theory and practice. Gramsci calls them “the whalebone in the corset,” “elites . . . of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them” (340).

Organic intellectuals are agents of change because they develop through their fusion of theory and practice and through critique of the common sense of their group the philosophy of an emergent social group. Both contact with everyday practice and critique are important in this process. Contact with everyday practice ensures that the philosophy of the group more accurately represents the real historical situation; critique of the commonsense knowledge of the group frees it from the influence of the views and beliefs of the dominant social group, who have achieved power in large part because of their success in persuading all groups in a society that their world view is true and useful. Organic intellectuals must work to achieve critical understanding of the current situation of a society; they must sort through the various arguments and perspectives that are represented in the common sense of their group in order to produce what Richard Johnson has called really useful knowledge, knowledge that arises out of everyday practice and that is purified of contradictory beliefs left over from the world view of the dominant group. In Johnson’s terms, critique is always an ongoing process that resists closure and is antithetical to the procedures of academic codification and disciplinarity, for critique offers “procedures by which other traditions are approached both for what they may yield and for what they inhibit” (38). Ongoing critique ensures that organic intellectuals do not turn into traditional intellectuals, that really useful knowledge is not turned into disciplinary knowledge, that knowledge is continually produced in the contact of theory and practice. Really useful knowledge, Johnson argues, demands that the priority always be “to become more ‘popular’ rather than more academic” (40).

To return now from the realms of theory to the situation of students writing in college, I want to argue that composition studies and its scholars and researchers and classroom teachers function for the most part as traditional intellectuals of the dominant social group, intellectuals who have lost sight of how their beliefs and practices are dependent on the world view of the white middle class of America and whose everyday experience is quite separate from and foreign to the life experiences of most students in college writing classes. Some scholars and teachers, it is true, struggle to remain in contact with the everyday experience of students in writing classes and struggle to define their problems and practices on the basis of this contact, but neither scholars nor classroom teachers of writing are favorably positioned to succeed in this effort. Whether scholars or teachers, whether regular faculty, part-time teachers, or graduate students, their position in the writing classroom is guaranteed by the institutional structures of the dominant social group: they are responsible to standards developed by this group in service to
its purposes; they are subject to education and training that has developed within the perspective of the dominant group; they are in daily contact with the discourse of other traditional intellectuals; and, finally, they are usually expected to separate theory from practice. In the case of faculty and graduate students they are admonished that their own work should have priority over teaching, and, in the case of part-time teachers, they are subjected to work loads that preclude efforts at reflection and critique and theory building. It is thus not surprising that it is difficult for classroom writing teachers to empower students as agents of their own writing, for the main prerequisite of such an endeavor is, as Freire has long pointed out, having some idea of what students' purposes and experiences are.

In contrast, tutors in writing centers who are in close contact with students and their everyday writing concerns, who reflect on their practices as tutors, and who study and critique theories of writing and language in light of their practice are better positioned to be organic intellectuals, who, along with their students, develop really useful knowledge of writing practices and of ways of teaching writing that help students achieve agency. Because writing centers are marginalized in relation to the central institutional structures of writing pedagogy and because writing center tutors are not generally expected to perform the function of intellectuals, the pressure on them to promulgate beliefs and practices that serve the purposes of the dominant group is less organized and less direct, although it is certainly not absent. North details some of the informal attempts of faculty to bring writing center practice into line with the authorized knowledge about writing, and his widely followed stricture that tutors are to support the classroom teacher's position completely is clear evidence of how writing centers do not escape domination. Yet one of the benefits of being excluded from the dominant group is that in this position one has less to protect and less to lose. Undergraduate students who serve as tutors have little investment in disciplinary beliefs and practices, and they are thus less responsive to its standards and expectations than they are to the needs and experiences of their peers. And, even for classroom teachers and graduate students, the continuous contact with the needs and experiences of writing students moves tutors to critique, to observe both what the traditional practices of writing instruction yield and what they inhibit.

I could continue to argue in support of my contention that tutors should and can serve as agents of change who empower students and who produce really useful knowledge, but I suspect that I can win your agreement better in another way. I want to conclude by recounting examples of how this is already happening in writing centers across the country. Following are five examples of practices of tutors and writing center administrators that seem to me to exemplify how writing centers can serve as a site of critique and how tutors can function as organic intellectuals.
1. Alice Gillam draws on Bakhtin to suggest a dialogic approach to tutoring that encourages students to negotiate between the demands of an assignment and their own interests in writing. She asks “whether the univocal conventional wisdom about reading ought to organize [a particular student’s] interpretation of her [reading] experience or whether [the student’s] experiences ought to reorganize or complicate conventional wisdom” (6), and she suggests that opening or dialogizing this text through the play of oppositions might enable Mary to see ways of satisfying her teacher’s demand for focus without sacrificing [her own] richness of voice and detail. . . . Rather than stripping her “story” to the bone in order to impose a focus, perhaps Mary needs to flesh out the contradictions embedded in the text and puzzle over the off-key shifts in voice as a way of discovering focus. . . . In short, a Bakhtinian perspective might have allowed [Mary’s tutor] to help Mary see the dissonances in voice and narrative as opportunities to dialogize and clarify meaning rather than as the enemies of focus, as forces to be subdued and “normalized.” (7)

2. Lucy Chang demonstrates how through conversation with a Chinese student she “came to understand the cultural reasoning” that dictated the shape of the student’s paper, which she describes as “a chaotic dance of ten letter words” (17). She found out that First, in China a scholar’s intellectual power is measured by the number of Chinese characters he or she knows, not by how coherently words are arranged as this particular assignment demanded. Second, the words she knew in English translated into something else, a distant relative of her initial thought. She believed that with one English word she could express everything she was feeling as she could with one Chinese character. Third, she believed that good writing was the kind that is found in textbooks, language that is condensed and lacking in emotion. The confusion and conflict began here. Last, her deficiency in English grammar was a huge insecurity. As a result, she took no responsibility for her writing, as a means of protecting herself from the shame of her grammatical mistakes. (17-18)

Chang concludes, “From this collective understanding, I believe that I was better equipped to facilitate her writing process” (18). Chang’s experience contrasts strikingly with the experience of the tutor described by Anne DiPardo, whose ignorance of her Native American student’s culture and experiences with writing frustrated all her persistent and well-intentioned efforts to help the student succeed.
3. Kate Latterell, in exploring the actual practices of student-centered tutoring, discovers that, for the two tutors she interviewed, being student-centered does not seem to mean being passive, for they both stressed the importance of developing personal relationships with students as being a big factor. Suzanne suggests that "the more effective teaching that I've seen happens in places like this where there's personal interaction and personal factors that are helping out." And Dave seems to suggest the same thing, saying, "I really believe very strongly in the powerful influences of individual and personal relationships" in making learning meaningful. (10)

Dave also refers to the importance of active engagement between tutor and student when he tells Kate that his idea of what tutoring involves has changed "from believing that this is totally undirected stuff" to thinking that his role is to provide a focus for the session by "keying in on" what the student needs to talk about." (9)

4. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s notion of exile as the creation of a space in which writers can question received knowledge and social norms and in the process transform them, Nancy Welch elaborates a style of tutoring that enables both tutors and students to achieve critical distance. She recounts her work with Margie, who is engaged in writing about her experience of sexual harassment for a panel discussion during the university's annual Women's Week. Welch notes how, early in the process, she has "already constructed a template of what [Margie] should eventually write for her Women's Week panel" and is "disturbed by the gap between that 'Ideal Text' (to borrow Knoblauch and Brannon's term) and the actual text [Margie] reads to" her and how, when she resists "the pressure of perfection," Margie "displaces that template text I had formed and encourages me to listen to her emerging text instead." (9-10). At the end of a prolonged series of sessions, when Margie is about to write a draft of the actual presentation, Welch offers her only one suggestion, that she remind herself to describe what happened to her. Welch recounts Margie's reaction: "Margie grins. 'Sure, I get it,' she replies. 'I still tend to avoid that. Yeah. The monster needs a description. I can do that. I know what the monster looks like'" (16).

5. Tom Fox describes the tutor training program at Chico in which tutors are asked "to reflect critically on how social and educational inequalities affect writing and learning" and how he explores with tutors "how the institution around us is shot through with actual hierarchies and habits of hierarchies and how we more easily fall into these habits than into a truly democratic writing center, no matter whether the tables are round or square" (21). His tutors read theory—"Paulo Freire on how all education is political, Dale Spender, Richard Ohmann, Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson, and John Ogbu on how gender, class, and race affect language use, and ... Mike
Rose on how institutional history and politics shape our conceptions of writing, especially remedial writing” (22-23)—and they reflect on their own practices and educational histories. Fox concludes,

When tutors reflect on and define their own role in a multi-cultural writing center and explore the relationship between a progressive writing center and a conservative university, they gain a sense of control over the interpretation of their experience. This control can lead to action both within and without the writing center. (23)

In these practices I see the beginnings of a vision of a writing center as a site of inquiry and critique, where tutors not only are helping students learn how to improve their writing but also are developing better practices of teaching writing and really useful knowledge about the experiences of students writing in college and in our society. Rather than “always focusing on the paper at hand” (Brooks 2), tutors build personal relationships with their students and come to understand how their students’ lives and experiences shape their writing practices. Rather than insisting that students are the only ones responsible for their texts, tutors help students understand how their words and their texts are inhabited by multiple and often alien voices that they must learn to deal with. Rather than “supporting the teacher’s position completely” (North 441), tutors help students negotiate a place within the confines of writing assignments for interests and abilities that arise out of their experiences. Rather than lamenting the inability of students to produce perfect papers, tutors celebrate students’ ability to develop new “templates” for texts. Rather than learning to sit across from the student and not write on their papers, tutors learn to critique the social and institutional setting of writing pedagogy and to reflect on their practices in light of theories of writing and language.

I think we can push this vision further. I would like, for example, to see writing center sessions sometimes focus on the critical reading of the syllabuses and assignments that students are given to work with so that tutors could help students see what subject positions are being offered to them in these texts and what spaces are left open in which they can construct different subject positions. Classroom teachers occasionally try to get their students to engage in such critical readings, but the teachers’ investment in the subjectivities they have imagined for their students fairly regularly defeats their efforts. In critical reading sessions in writing centers, tutors could also help students figure out why their teachers’ ideas of what they need to learn sometimes conflict with what they think they need to learn and how recognizing these conflicts can lead to change as well as to accommodation.

I would also like to see tutor training seminars begin to blend with research groups, so that faculty, writing center administrators, and/or graduate students work together with undergraduate tutors and with the students who come to writing centers to develop systematic inquiries into the
nature of writing in college and the value of different methods of teaching writing. I know that this is happening in some writing centers, and I think that in such research we can begin to bridge the chasm that often separates writing center workers from classroom teachers and theorists of writing. Writing centers are and can be at the heart of our joint inquiry into the functions of literacy in our society. We need to make better use of these "border" spaces within our institutions, spaces where the lines of power blur and the demands of discipline and evaluation weaken in ways that allow us to create together better ways of writing and of teaching writing.

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*Marilyn M. Cooper* is an Associate Professor of English at Michigan Technological University. She writes about social aspects of writing and teaching writing.

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