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The Regulatory Role of the Writing Center: Coming to Terms with a Loss of Innocence

Nancy Grimm

In this essay, I am going to take an unhappy approach to writing center work and suggest that we don't always accomplish as much as we think we do and that in the long run we sometimes do more harm than good. I liken this task to the paint stripping job I undertook when my family first moved into our old house. Through the years, the woodwork had been covered with layers of paint, chosen to conform either to the latest home fashion colors or to sales at local hardware stores. These layers of paint obscured the natural wood and the once fashionable colors (lime green?) no longer contributed to the home's beauty. As I came to know the seasons in this home, particularly the stormy winters which lasted from October to April, I came to understand the playful attempts to add color to the house, but today it is the texture and highlights of the wood that lay underneath those colors that people notice when they visit us.

This paint stripping metaphor utterly fails to get at the human complexity of writing center work; I ask the reader to allow it to serve only to identify the underlying purpose of this essay, which is to figuratively strip away the rhetoric we have developed to explain what happens in writing centers, particularly the rhetoric that places writing centers in an uncomplicated relationship of service to academic literacy. My goal is to fully position writing centers in the painful paradoxes of literacy work, to strip away the belief in innocence in order to make us more fully aware of the ways that literacy practices reproduce the social order and regulate access and subjectivity. I will use the work of literacy scholars and cultural theorists to expose the unresolved cultural tensions that reside beneath the surface of literacy

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work. To illustrate the ways writing centers are often inadvertently implicated in regulatory uses of literacy, I will use two stories about writing center students. Finally, in exchange for questioning the innocence of writing center work as it is currently theorized, I will attempt to show what we might gain from situating writing center work within an ideological model of literacy and an articulatory model of social change.

What's Wrong with this Picture?

In a recent essay about writing center history, Peter Carino argues that writing centers are not engaged in the evolutionary progression that some scholars like to imagine. Instead of the “neat march of progress from current-traditional gradgrindianism to theoretically sophisticated nurture,” Carino maintains that writing centers are repeatedly working through themes that haunt the scene of their work, particularly issues related to writing center clientele, staffing, and institutional identity. My reading (and my lived experience) of writing center history is similar to Carino’s. Many writing centers, including the one I now direct, were established during the 1970s to deal with the students who didn’t belong, students who weren’t measuring up. Although writing centers were established to deal with students of difference, they have distanced themselves from this remedial history in order to gain legitimacy and respect on their campuses. Many writing centers have increasingly aligned themselves with mainstream practices of literacy and with technological support for this literacy. Over the years, they have shifted their philosophies and practices in response to current theory in composition, yet they have generally represented themselves in a relationship of service to institutional practices of literacy.

The repeated emergence of questions about the institutional role of the writing center is due to the contradictions at the heart of literacy work. When we teach literacy, we want students to think independently and critically, but we also want them to present their thinking in culturally accepted forms of academic discourse. James Donald, a curriculum theorist, exposes the ambivalent relationship between individuation and socialization in literacy work. According to Donald, the literacy curriculum is “both essential and impossible” because it “boils down to the demand that young people be taught, first, to fit into some social role and function that requires recruits, and, second, to think for themselves” (120). Writing centers are not well-positioned to come to terms with the tensions between these two demands. Because writing centers are represented as sites of service and individualized instruction where students can learn the institutionally sanctioned ways of literacy, some writing centers have recently become the logical sites for competency testing on their campuses. Not only are writing centers often the site for all university concerns about writing, but they are also supposed to test, measure, and document the literacy performance of students.
The theorist who most quickly penetrates the “paint” that obscures our ability to recognize the writing center’s implication in disciplinary forms of power is Michel Foucault. Foucault argues that disciplinary power functions by means of hierarchical supervision, normalizing judgment, and ultimately in the examination (170). Foucault notes that way back in 1699, tutors were added to the hierarchical organization of the school in order to increase disciplinary observation, to establish the “network of gazes.” Foucault’s observation about the genesis of tutoring in the development of modern school systems sounds remarkably similar to the way Kenneth Bruffee represented peer tutoring as a way for teachers to “reach students by organizing them to teach each other” (4). According to Bruffee, through peer tutoring programs, teachers “harnessed the powerful educative force of peer influence” (4). Peer tutoring worked because it changed the social context of learning yet “did not seem to change what people learned” (4). Bruffee’s focus on the teacher’s role being one of “harnessing,” “organizing,” and “structuring” peer influence suggests that his conception of peer tutoring was intended to extend the power of the teacher’s authority rather than provide a genuinely different alternative to learning.

The individualization that marks writing center practice might appear to be a humane response to a new student body. However, from the perspective provided by Foucault, tutoring could be seen instead as “an intensification and ramification of power.” Instead of excluding underprepared students, we now analyze them. Writing centers correct, measure, and supervise abnormal writers in order to meet the standards set by the institution. Because power circulates in the normalized writing practices of the institution, it cannot be challenged. As this power becomes inscribed in our teaching and learning relationships, we assume responsibility for our own subjection. Foucault calls “The Normal” the “principle of coercion in teaching” (184). The power of normalization works by “imposing[ing] homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels” (184). Regulatory power is further protected by the psychology of institutional interpellation whereby we assume the professional roles required of us in order to avoid the profound internal conflict that occurs when we question established beliefs.

Although writing center scholars are often cranky about persisting medical metaphors, these metaphors accurately represent the emergency room nature of much writing center pedagogy. As expert and well-intentioned as writing center efforts are, writing center tutors rarely have time to analyze the conflicts that underlie the writing struggles that bring students to writing centers in the first place, nor are they institutionally positioned to have anything to say about these conflicts. A writing center session typically includes questions about the assignment, and a tutor typically works to bring the student closer to fulfilling the expectations of the assignment. Like
paramedics, writing centers often work under time pressures, and just as a paramedic has little time to analyze what conditions caused an accident but acts to bring an injured person’s vital signs to within a normal range, so a tutor must act quickly to help a student develop a paper in line with what the assignment requires. Because many writing centers operate with the policy of supporting the teacher completely, a promise first articulated in Stephen North’s 1984 essay, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” the possibility of studying the conflicts that bring students to writing centers is rarely even imagined in the day-to-day encounters of the typically busy center. North himself has critiqued this pledge of support, acknowledging that the lived experience of the writing center exposes one to the “seamier side of things” (“Revisiting” 13). He observes that the “détente” implicit in the pledge of support creates uncomfortable pressures for writing center workers. Moreover, North notes that writing center resources have never matched its mission, creating a situation where everyone “just gets weary” (17).

The weariness noted by North and the continual reemergence of unresolved issues noted by Carino call for a reexamination of the role of the writing center. Because the work of the writing center is strongly regulated by how we read and write the cultural beliefs about literacy embedded in normalized practices such as institutional placement, syllabus construction, assignment making, conferencing, grading, and writing center policies, a reexamination of the role of the writing center must include a critical engagement with these cultural beliefs. Our culture teaches us to locate the problem of literacy in individuals (e.g. a lack of preparedness, carelessness, “poor” family background, first language “interference”) and the solution in institutional practices (e.g. tougher assignments, more muscular models of assessment, increased emphasis on standards, back-to-the-basics instruction—even in more vigorous and visible writing centers). Because these cultural beliefs sustain our work, we have little reason to question them. But if we strip away the belief in our innocence and view literacy as a highly contextualized set of social practices that regulate access and subjectivity, then writing centers must confront the fact that they are more often than not helping students conform to the regulatory power that resides in assignments, testing, and grading practices. Conforming to regulatory power is not necessarily a bad practice, but when we pretend that this regulatory power is liberating or culture-neutral, we miss opportunities for honest and critical engagement that might eventually change practices and create a more equitable distribution of power.

Two Illustrative Stories

To illustrate how the writing center is implicated in the regulatory function of literacy, I turn to two stories. Significantly, both of the stories I share are about students who encountered difficulty with the regulatory
practices of literacy even though they held well-deserved positions at a competitive university. Both students came to the writing center on their own initiative and both worked with experienced writing coaches—myself and the assistant director of the writing center. I emphasize these circumstances to call attention to the fact that even though these were bright students at a competitive university and their “tutors” were arguably the two most experienced and theoretically informed people on the staff, the hidden conflicts of the literacy curriculum operated in tacit ways to limit their work.

Some may read these stories as exceptions to the norm, as stories about students who consciously resisted culturally accepted forms of discourse. Such readers may prefer to assure themselves that most students don’t encounter this conflict and are quite happy to comply with culturally accepted norms, just as the previous owners of our home were quite happy with the painted woodwork. My greatest concern is that some may read these stories as essentializing and think I am suggesting that each student has one true form of subjectivity which must be allowed to emerge when they compose. I believe agency in writing is much more complicated than simple compliance or resistance; in fact, agency most likely emerges from the conflicts between these two forces, but that is a subject of another essay. I also believe that anyone who has really listened to students in the writing center knows that they are much more complicated people than we can ever hope to represent in our stories. Finally, I believe that “mainstream” students are just as likely to experience such conflicts and that we serve all students more effectively if we address their options for negotiating conflicts rather than pretend those conflicts don’t exist.

My first story is about a white, well-dressed young woman in her late teens who was enrolled in an honors section of the university’s first-year composition course. Nothing about her appearance or her use of language would mark her as a student of “difference.” She was not “sent” to the writing center, but she came of her own accord to sign up for a weekly appointment. When we met for our first appointment, I had trouble making eye contact with her and strained to hear her soft hesitant voice. To my standard inquiry about what she would like to work on, she replied that she wanted to focus on grammar. From a great deal of gentle coaxing in the first two sessions, I learned that she had been the valedictorian of her rural high school class. Even though I assured her that her writing was grammatically sound, she indicated that she was feeling overwhelmed and out of place in a class where she said everyone else had much better grammar and a much larger vocabulary than she did, a class where everyone “sounded” so much smarter than she felt. Although the drafts she brought to the writing center were flat and strangely confusing, they were grammatically sound. Yet she persistently dodged my efforts to engage her in elaboration or development of her subject matter; she only wanted to be sure the grammar was correct.
As we worked together during the term, I learned that her background was not unusual for someone raised in an isolated rural area; her parents were conservative Christians, and they encouraged her to socialize with church members and to be a good student. Although her father was on a disability pension because of a farming accident, her family invested a considerable amount of what little money they had to support her interest in training and showing horses. She pleased her parents by winning many academic honors and horse show ribbons.

Her section of Honors English was taught by an associate professor who was using a collection of essays that focused on gender issues. As we discussed these essays in our sessions, I could see that the lived experience of this young woman had not given her much cause or encouragement to consider gender as an “issue.” She had been raised to believe that if a person set goals and worked and prayed hard, those goals could be achieved regardless of gender. Late in the term, I learned why she never wanted to discuss her subject matter. She confided in me that she had been making up stories to please her teacher. She was creating first-person narratives that reinforced her teacher’s beliefs in order to get a good grade. As a good female student, she knew how to please and to stay out of trouble by repeating the performance required of her. But she did not intervene in the social formation of the class; she did not exercise agency as a writer, particularly if we define agency as engaging opening with her conflict-ridden position in the class. Her teacher may not have found her papers very insightful or interesting, but her writing was clean enough and clear enough to earn her a B in the course. Near the end of the term, I learned that she was considering dropping out of the university. The large class ring that had been so conspicuous on her finger all term belonged to a young man who was eager for her to return to the small town where she had been raised, and she clearly still felt out of place at the university.

As her writing center coach, I had tried to build her confidence and to encourage her to write about her lived experience, but she struggled to locate the kind of events in her background that she thought her classmates and teacher would find interesting. She was savvy enough about the ways of school to read the tacit expectations and to supply what she thought the teacher was looking for. She was smart enough to create a fictionalized experience, but she found no space in the classroom to openly reflect on issues that were important to her, to intervene in the meanings that were offered to her. In fact, her recognition of herself as Other than her classmates undermined her confidence in her ability to manage even the grammar of her native language.

This student—and others like her—will perform for the benefit of a grade, but because the role they must perform is so divorced from their lived experience, needs, and desires, their good grades in composition say little about their capacity or their inclination to use literacy to their own ends or...
to negotiate with the meanings offered to them. To blame the underlying feminist agenda of the class oversimplifies the complex forces at work and also overlooks the notion that education is supposed to be a mind-expanding journey. Most of us, when we teach, are motivated by a desire to share our personal and academic understandings of the world with our students. Faced with twenty to thirty students, we are not able to address the individual conflicts that occur. More often than not, we are unaware of the conflicts our assignments and reading materials create.

More significantly than this particular teacher’s expectations, there were other institutional arrangements that created conflicts for this student. By positioning her in an honors class, the institution hailed her as “the good student,” a position she was familiar with from her high school success, a position that called up her desire to prove herself, to be right, to be correct. She became increasingly uneasy when she recognized herself as different from her classmates. In this course, she confronted her divided self at a time when she had to prove herself. She is not the student the course was designed for, yet she is hailed by the institution as “honors student.” Because composition teaching represents itself as “comfortable” and “student-centered,” it paradoxically creates classrooms where discussion of these conflicts is suppressed.

The writing center, positioned underneath all these institutional arrangements and expectations, serves primarily to reinforce the status quo, to support the teacher and the institution—even when students inadvertently sign up to work with the writing center director. As a student, this young woman recognized that the writing center was a place that could help her get by. And as her writing coach, I did help her get by, but not to make a place for herself, not to negotiate between institutional demands and her own needs. Because of all the normalized practices that suppressed discussion of the conflicts, I was not aware of the tactics she was using to address them until the term was almost over. Her work was read as that of an inexperienced rural student rather than a student sophisticated enough to read the tacit expectations and to create the experience the class seemed to require. Having earned her trust so late in the term, I was not about to betray her strategy to her teacher. So the writing center functioned to keep things in place. The teacher remained unaware of the student’s conflicts; the student’s academic writing strategies remained limited to pleasing authorities by providing what they ask for; the student remained unconvinced that she belonged in college; the institutional placement, grading, and assignment practices went unchallenged.

My second story is about an African American student from Detroit, clearly a student of difference on a campus where African American students account for slightly less than one percent of the student enrollment. This young man had found the writing center in his first year at the university when he encountered a multitude of adjustment challenges, including the
return of a childhood stuttering problem. Now in his fifth and final year, more confident and certainly more adept at negotiation, he returned to the writing center with a draft of a paper for his advanced composition class. His writing coach (the assistant director) saw that in response to an assignment inviting him to write about personal experience, he had chosen the language of his city neighborhood to evoke memories of his childhood. She appreciated the unique rhythms and metaphors of the paper, but a week later the young man returned with his paper, which had been marked by his professor for problems of diction and questions of appropriate word choice. It became clear from the detailed comments of the professor that he expected this young man to assume the diction of the white middle class even when he was writing about playing pick-up basketball on the streets of a black neighborhood.

In a chance encounter with the professor, the writing coach learned that the professor had determined that the student’s style was “too flashy” and believed that the student’s reluctance to revise was due to “stubbornness.” The coach, positioned in a relationship of service to the department, felt she would further jeopardize the student’s standing in the class if she defended his choices or argued for the extent of his engagement with his work. The professor didn’t like the dialogue in which the student incorporated black dialect or the student’s metaphors. Descriptive passages had been crossed out and replaced with traditional academic English. Reluctantly, the young man gave in; he had learned to pick his battles. Together, he and his coach worked on writing the paper to correspond to the professor’s suggestions. The student was not happy with his final draft. In his opinion, he had sold out, submitted to institutional authority in order to get the grade he needed. He commented that the changes he was required to make “made the paper sound ridiculous.” The professor, however, saw the changes in his draft as a sign of the student’s progress. The divisions between the races remained the same, the frustrations within the young man and his writing coach had deepened, the normalized writing practices of the institution remained unchallenged, and the writing center had again functioned to keep things in place.

Even though the young woman and young man in my stories had earned places in the academy based on assessments of individual ability, both encountered normalizing practices that regulated their access and their subjectivity. Although the young woman engaged in a resistant act—lying to conform to expectations—her resistance was unknown to her teacher and her performance was read as bland and marked as a B, a low grade for an honors student. Her experience in the composition course, often regarded by the university as a significant site of adjustment to college, convinced her that she was an outsider. While the resistant performance of the young woman went unnoticed, the young black man’s efforts to produce a resistant text were read as “flashy” and “stubborn.” The threat of a low grade forced his compliance and convinced him that the university was not open to the
cultural exchange that might allow for black dialect in student writing. As he commented later, "[The teacher] needs to expand his horizons; class should be a learning experience for the students and the teacher."

Researchers have demonstrated that middle class students, particularly ones from urban environments, appear brighter than other students because they more quickly recognize and adopt the performances required of them without experiencing cultural conflict (Brodkey; Gee; Heath; Hull, Rose et al.). Significantly, those of us who have achieved academic success in schools by easily accommodating expectations are least likely to question literacy practices because to do so would be to question our own positions. More often than not, we are the people who staff writing centers and composition programs, and our easy familiarity and achievements within what is constituted as the normal way of things intensifies our exercise of power.

Moreover, the scope of writing center practice is focused on changing students rather than changing teachers or academic practices. Writing problems are located in individuals rather than in assumptions embedded in academic discourse. Students perceive writing centers as places that help them get by rather than places where they can figure out how to change or challenge the system. As Foucault predicted, we internalize the principles of our own subjection, suppressing conflicts, prohibiting conversations. Students aren't supposed to tell tutors that they are making up stories to please the teacher. Tutors aren't supposed to help students embellish papers that aren't "true." Tutors aren't supposed to tell a student, particularly an African American student, that the teacher thinks he is stubborn or flashy. Tutors aren't supposed to tell teachers that their assignments have created obstacles for students. Tutors, in general, aren't supposed to question the wisdom of academic practices. The hierarchy that structures the relationship of the writing center to the classroom allows the teacher, the one in charge, to assume a stance of solidarity with the subordinate—the writing center tutor. As Ron Scollon's work shows, it runs counter to cultural rules of communication for the subordinate, the tutor, to question that solidarity of belief. Moreover, as Joan Mullin points out, tutors’ own deeply held beliefs about literacy may prevent frank discussion with students about why academic literacy is privileged over students’ particular ways of reading and writing (164). In fact, as Mullin says, opening tutorials to this type of discussion is risky business because "seeing that the gate to institutions is not as widely opened as students think can anger as well as disappoint them" (170).

Even though academic literacy doesn’t necessarily promote greater understanding, greater democratic participation, or more inclusive universities, the system maintains itself because individuals develop ways of behaving that protect the status quo. The self-help literature calls this behavior pattern codependency and identifies its characteristics as a disabling dishonesty, a keeping of secrets, a disguise of reality, and a focus on an external referent.
Layer upon layer of institutional arrangements, hierarchical relationships, individual habits, and professional concerns prohibit frank discussion between writing center workers and teachers. I think of the butler in the movie *Remains of the Day*, whose allegiance to the role of service to the upper class owner of the manor overpowered his ability to think critically about the war mongering going on within the manor and even inhibited his ability to develop the self-knowledge to make changes in his own life. Like the crew of house servants in this movie, writing centers workers are expected not to see or discuss the contradictions in literacy teaching. And they are expected to carry out the “unpleasant” tasks. Just as the manor owner asked the butler to speak to his young nephew about sexual reproduction, so faculty members expect writing centers to address the literacy indiscretions of their students but not to second guess or question instructional practices.

**So Now What?**

To the extent that writing centers believe not only in the neutrality of their work, but also take comfort in the worn couches and homelike ambiance of their work sites, to the extent that they theorize themselves as institutionalized sites of service and individualized instruction, they are participating in the regulatory uses of literacy. Writing center workers often represent themselves as busy, pragmatic, flexible people. This self-characterization too often tempts us to keep our heads down, focused on working one-to-one with students within our specific institutions. We align our philosophy with our local institutional missions and advise one another to do the same, insisting that “a model writing center is difficult, if not impossible, to describe” (Kinkead and Harris xv). Yet if we continue to operate locally, adapting our services to new constituencies, new institutional expectations, new methodologies, we may lose sight of a more global concern, one that Deborah Brandt identifies. Brandt insists that the goal of genuinely pluralistic institutions will not be achieved if teachers of literacy do nothing to broaden the base of the standard. She argues that “it is not enough to say that everyone is welcome in the ‘big tent’ of literate culture without acknowledging that they will be bringing new materials with which to remake the tent” (*Literacy* 124). The stories of the two students illustrate how small the tent remains and how difficult it is to imagine making it of new cloth. Instead, we keep trying to change the students to fit the tent.

To move beyond a regulatory relationship of service to academic literacy, writing centers can take a programmatic shift in focus from Brandt’s suggestion and broaden their scope to include the work of reconsidering what counts as standards in a multicultural democracy. Because of their liminal position between the lives of students and the life of the academy and because of the intimacy of their contact with students, writing centers are uniquely positioned to redefine literacy to include the interpretative skills required to
negotiate meaning with those who come to learn and know in cultures significantly different from the middle class norm of the American academy.

To return to my paint stripping metaphor, Brandt’s vision of a remade tent suggests to me the tantalizing richness of the writing center’s position, a richness obscured by layers of institutional paint. And stripping seems to be a timely activity. Composition scholars are critiquing the problematic and limited subjectivity we have constructed for students (see Miller; Helmers; Faigley). Theorists are imagining the classroom as a contact zone where “one [has] to work in the knowledge that whatever one [says is] going to be systematically received in radically heterogeneous ways that we [are] neither able nor entitled to prescribe” (Pratt 39). This work creates a context for writing centers to redefine their mission in more global and structural ways. We need a writing center pedagogy that creatively engages with the cultural conflicts which are now hidden. We also need opportunities for dialogue with teachers who are willing to have students engage in these conflicts even if the engagement might produce texts that fall short of clarity and coherence. We need ways of instantiating what Pratt calls the arts of the contact zone, which she describes as

ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories), ways to move into and out of rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all important concept of cultural mediation. (40)

The African American student needed strategies for moving into and out of the black dialect that formed the texture of his story, and the young woman needed strategies for mediating between the world she knew and the world of her classmates and peers, strategies that did not require her to suppress aspects of her own history. A revised vision of literacy teaching offers potential for reconfiguring the troublesome relations among students, teachers, and writing centers and for addressing the problematic institutional identity of writing centers, but it also challenges us to engage critically with some long-standing writing center traditions, to penetrate the layers of ways we have convinced ourselves of the necessary limits of our role in higher education.

The Local Mission Tradition

When we conceptualize the philosophy of individual writing centers too locally, we lose the perspective that allows us to see larger systems, particularly the way that literacy operates in social and ideological ways to replicate existing relationships within those systems. Joyce Kinkead and Jeanette Harris, in their edited collection Writing Centers in Context (1993), note that
although effectiveness in writing centers is strongly connected to an intelligent response to local conditions, these contextual forces create “a sometimes tortuous path among conflicting needs and demands” (xvi). Because the essays in this collection focus on how programmatic decisions are made in light of institutional context, the emphasis is on adaptability, flexibility, multiple services, improving student performance, making deals, and responding energetically and cheerfully to changing needs.

For the most part, the writing centers represented in this collection position themselves to serve existing practices and power relations. In concluding reflections, Kinkead notes that little has been written about the politics of writing centers, the issues of cultural and linguistic diversity, or the potential of the writing center as a site of research (246-247). These are significant silences. Some contributing authors hint at the impediments to addressing these issues. For example, Ed Lotto identifies the contradictory attitudes about writing on his university campus (79); Gail Okawa writes about cultural insensitivity (172) and patronizing attitudes toward students of difference (170); and Joan Mullin notes that many faculty still hold tutoring centers suspect (47). This negative emotional climate, rooted in cultural beliefs that support regulatory uses of literacy, is not conducive to writing centers making moves beyond the position created for them. The issues that Lotto, Okawa, and Mullin identify and the silences that Kinkead notes reveal the intellectual work waiting to be done if writing centers assume a more direct engagement with regulatory uses of literacy. It is work that all writing centers, regardless of local politics, must undertake.

**Writing Center Work as Individualized Instruction**

The teaching of literacy, even in the writing center, is tied to the American belief that any child can become president or a millionaire or, better yet, both. This belief is embedded in the structure of American schooling which purportedly guarantees access to all who work to merit it. The more literacy teachers and writing center tutors feel that they have “converted” their students to a middle-class norm, the better they are supposed feel about their work because they are “helping” individuals achieve the American dream. This belief that the ability to speak and write correct, standard English guarantees access to professional positions and economic success has structured literacy teaching for many years. Surely, the professor of the African American student thought he was doing the right thing by insisting on the standard diction. As Stuckey observes, “We in English departments usually believe that what we are doing is right. We believe this in spite of the fact that we often feel we do not get the right results. At the same time, many of us have rarely examined why we think we are right” (21-22).

Hegemony is maintained because we consent to the world view that is
carried in our language. Central to the American world view is the belief that the individual can overcome all obstacles, that change is “a matter of pulling one’s self up by the bootstraps” (Villanueva 121). Literacy instruction, especially writing center instruction, is intimately linked to the belief that the individual rather than the system must change. When writing centers theorize themselves as sites of individualized instruction, the normative, prescriptive, and regulatory functions of literacy practices go unchallenged and unrevised even though the intimate, relational work of the writing center provides us with the altered perspectives that calls the wisdom of mainstream practices into question. We discount the knowledge that is formed in writing center relationships because we are trained to believe that knowledge results from a process of rational inquiry neatly separated from human relationships. Instead of theorizing writing centers as sites of individualized instruction, we need to theorize writing centers as places where mutual transformations occur. Writing centers cannot escape the ambivalence and contradictions of literacy, but they can stop locating the problems in individuals and instead focus on developing more creative ways of negotiating cultural authority. It is no wonder that Mary Trachsel’s recent call for a transformed notion of academic scholarship that includes intersubjective knowledge arises out of a writing center setting.

The Practitioner Image

As a pragmatist who has strengthened the position of our writing center by aligning budgeting and programmatic arguments with institutional issues, I recognize how important it is to operate with knowledge of institutional politics and issues, but I believe that writing centers need to think beyond local, practical work. Jeanne Simpson has written that a service mentality is not incompatible with viewing writing centers as a change agent, but she also emphasizes that writing centers need to be proactive rather than reactive, willing to take the risk of being involved internally on such issues as faculty governance and curriculum revision and always aware that the academy is a “beast of intransigent conservatism” (3). Simpson is right—change is catalyzed not from reactive but from proactive positions, and real change must occur at a structural level.

Although I agree with Simpson’s advice that in order to be change agents writing center directors have to increase their involvement in important campus issues, I believe the vision for change will not come solely from a service mentality. In order to develop a change-agent vision, writing center workers must be theoretical bricoleurs; they must constantly seek understanding of why conditions exist, why structures resist change, how change can be enacted. In 1989, when Lisa Ede urged writing centers to begin investigations into social theories of language, she predicted resistance. Theorizing takes time, she acknowledged, time that can be both difficult to
find and frustrating to spend because so much theory is difficult to read. Yet one of Ede’s strongest arguments for theory is that the pursuit of theory would lead us into conversation with others who are also seeking perspective and change. Recognizing that theory must work in conversation with practice, Ede also said that writing centers are the “right folk” to keep theoreticians honest (11).

As theorists, writing center workers need to ask themselves some difficult questions about their relationship to literacy. Do writing centers exist to support a functionalist literacy, assisting writers in their efforts to meet whatever the market or academy demands? Do they support expressivist literacy, seeking to liberate the voices of individuals? And what exactly are they liberating them from? Do they support cultural literacy, seeking to develop a student “body” that is more uniform in its knowledge of cultural norms? Are writing centers also supposed to be the center of responsibility for assuring that university graduates are computer literate? Or do writing centers function in order to enable competing representations of literacy to flourish within the university? Do they function because so many representations exist and students need assistance adapting to the version that will be employed to evaluate them? Are writing center workers simply brokers among the versions, privileging the version with the most power and currency, the one most likely to affect the particular student they are working with?

Sometimes such questions are answered by saying that writing centers serve no one notion of literacy but are always evolving, responding to needs as they arise, serving a multitude of functions, walking, as Eric Hobson puts it, an epistemological tightrope. The practitioner’s busy struggle to address competing versions of literacy allows little time to reflect on the politics and issues that underlie competing notions of literacy: “I’m just so busy meeting with students, attending committee meetings, making classroom presentations, and figuring out how to make room to store the results of the competency tests to meet state guidelines. Who has time to think?” If writing center workers are going to come to terms with the regulatory uses of literacy, they will need to find the time to read and reflect in order to develop alternative language, new visions, and creative strategies for engaging with competing notions of literacy. Effective and critical engagement requires a practitioner’s savvy as well as theoretical understanding.

**Literacy Work as a Neutral Practice**

The habit of thinking about literacy as a neutral, self-governed technical skill that all individuals have equal opportunity to acquire forms the basis of what Brian Street calls the *autonomous* model of literacy. When rapid social change puts stress on the system, an autonomous view of literacy is invoked to put more pressure on individuals to master the codes that will ensure
success. Writing centers have benefited from this belief. Our growth is linked to social changes such as open admissions, the literacy crisis of the seventies, the rapidly changing student population of the eighties and nineties. Yet as Anne DiPardo has observed, “unresolved tensions [tug] continually at a fabric of institutional good intentions” (126).

The most insidious feature of the autonomous model is that while it insists on the value-free nature of literate forms, it uses these forms to rank and sort students based on features of their texts. By emphasizing the “culture-free” and technical nature of one kind of literacy, the autonomous model can claim that those without this literacy are somehow deficient. Much of the power of the autonomous model resides in what Street calls a “sleight of hand.” Those who insist on neutrality still manage “to maintain that their own conventions are superior” (28-30). The neutrality of the claim disguises its racist and classist agenda. As John Trimbur has observed, for years we have maintained the myth of a classless society by using literacy to “draw lines of social distinction, mark status, and rank students in meritocratic order” (279). Trimbur argues that our “ritual invocation” of the literacy crisis can be historically associated with “middle-class anxieties about loss of status and downward mobility” (280). He notes that historically, “fear about downward mobility and loss of status has repeatedly been displaced and refigured as a fear of the alien and the other—whether Irish Catholics in the 1840s, southern and eastern Europeans in the 1890s, or Hispanics and Asians in the 1980s” (293).

Resituating Writing Center Work Within an Ideological Model of Literacy

According to Street, an ideological model of literacy recognizes that literacy is multiple not singular, that literate forms have political and ideological significance, that the teaching of literacy is caught up in stratified social structures, and that forms of literacy cannot be isolated and taught as neutral and separate skills. Unlike autonomous literacy, which privileges meaning that resides in texts, ideological literacy privileges the meaning that is constructed in interactions among people. As Street puts it, “Too often what has been taken as ‘illogical’ or ‘mystical’ is, in reality, pregnant with symbolic meaning which the observer has failed to appreciate through attempting to interpret it literally” (25). Street uses evidence from investigations into literacy by psychologists, historians, and anthropologists to make the case that literacy is not a neutral, technical, autonomous skill but instead is a social practice that is often an attempt of a ruling group to exert control over “potentially disruptive lower orders” (11).

Theorists from a wide range of disciplines—including history, psychology, linguistics, social science, and anthropology—have made the case that literacy is more often used as an instrument of control than as an instrument
of liberation or communication. Piotr Michalowski, a scholar of the ancient Near East, comments on the early uses of literacy to inscribe public buildings: “One could argue that the primary audience for these texts were those who could not read and that this ‘silent’ writing was a supreme symbol of social hierarchy and control” (58-59). Sylvia Scribner, an anthropologist, points out that frequently the controlling function of literacy is disguised with religious discourse. Because English educators want very much to believe that advanced literacy is good for students, that it will make them more tolerant and more successful people, they represent literacy as a saving grace and teaching literacy becomes a missionary job of conversion. However, the academic faith in the saving power of literacy has been undermined by historians of literacy. In a study of literacy practices in nineteenth-century Canada, Harvey J. Graff notes that he could find no evidence that mass literacy led to greater economic development, greater class mobility, or greater democracy. In fact, he found that a nation’s economic gain was more due to the literacy of key individuals rather than the literacy of the masses (88). He concludes that those key individuals, the political and religious leaders, recognized mass literacy as dangerous, so they were careful to regulate its use in carefully controlled formal institutions (90).

The regulation of literacy and its relationship with schooling has also been noted by Jenny Cook-Gumperz. Cook-Gumperz observes that prior to the eighteenth century, the conception of literacy was pluralistic; this pluralistic conception recognized a variety of reading and writing skills, a multiplicity of literacies, all of which had social and recreational value. According to Cook-Gumperz, schooled literacy grew out of a concern of the upper classes that the growth of popular literacy would diminish the pool of manual labor and lead to social unrest (26). This concern resulted in bringing popular literacy under the control of school systems and “changed forever the relationship of the majority of the population to their own talents for learning and for literacy” (27). The earlier acceptance of pluralistic literacy did not lend itself to separation or ranking, but new schooled literacy led to standardization, stratification, and systemization (30). Thus we ended up with a school literacy that normalizes, that eschews difference, that separates people from their own desires to know and to communicate.

Thinking about literacy in ideological ways in the writing center means engaging critically with normalized cultural beliefs. When the proofreading issue, for example, is contextualized within an ideological model of literacy, it becomes much more complicated. Rather than simply refusing to engage in this task because individual writers are supposed to be able to do it for themselves, writing centers need more complex understandings of the issues involved. In the case of the African American student, “proofreading” a narrative text that he had deliberately written in the language he remembered hearing is a very complex task involving cultural translation and negotiation.
of feelings of cultural domination. Writing centers need to develop ways of recognizing when these cultural conflicts are occurring and strategies for engaging in dialogue with students in ways that frankly acknowledge the values at stake.

The potential for agency in writing arises when we acknowledge how literacy practices are linked to culturally internalized beliefs and then develop new tactics for negotiating these beliefs. As Marilyn Cooper argues, rather than insisting that ultimately students must take responsibility for their writing, writing centers can best help students become agents of their own writing by helping them understand how and the extent to which they are 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. (7-8)

By more quickly recognizing the institutional arrangements and expectations that create conflicts, writing center workers will have more time to explore students’ options for dealing with them. Had I been quicker, for example, to recognize the young woman’s source of conflict, I could have encouraged her to explore the tension between the fictional and the real. At the very least, I could have acknowledged how cultural forces limited her work and legitimized her efforts to deal with them. Instead, assuming she was writing the first-person narrative her teacher asked for, I contributed to her nervousness by asking her to share details about an experience she was still struggling to create. As Cooper suggests, the choice is not whether or not writing centers should continue to assist students in the work of accommodating academic culture. The choice is whether or not writing centers will frankly acknowledge the cultural forces that limit their work. In addition to allowing for more frankness about the values inherent in academic literacy, I believe we need to undertake our work with a more deliberate anthropological bent so that we document not just the numbers of students we have worked with but the expanded realities and understandings that result from it.

**An Articulatory Theory of Change**

In a positive sense, the tradition of pragmatism prepares writing centers to undertake a Swiss cheese approach to change where “the individual ‘finds a hole and keeps nibbling’” (Pearson 369). As Pearson and her colleagues observe, “institutional change is more likely to happen rapidly in places prepared for change by effective nibblers” (370). This model of change corresponds to Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of articulatory political practice. Articulatory practice, rather than hopefully holding out for a revolutionary
event, constantly seeks ways of changing the discursive terrain, identifying nodal points that can be articulated and moved in the direction of a more democratic practice. Rather than a contestatory political practice which requires an either/or strategy and demands that one side lose in order for the other to win, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the possibility for a deeper democracy exists in an acceptance of the multiplicity of viewpoints in circulation and the ongoing effort to articulate multiple discourses in the direction of greater democratic practices.

Their key term—articulation—as used in the United States is associated with clear, carefully enunciated spoken language, but it gains added meaning from its British use. Stuart Hall explains the nuances of the British meaning of the word with reference to the articulated lorry, a truck linked to other vehicles. This more fully developed sense of articulation includes not only the clear, well-defined expression of a position, but also the productive linkage of that position with other concerns. Articulation depends on recognizing the “nodal points” and articulating or joining them to other efforts. It does not wait for a revolution nor does it waste time trying to undo the links held together with tendential force. Writing center workers know that teachers do not all share the same vision of social change. Rather than engage in unproductive and frustrating dialog with those resistant to change, articulatory practice encourages us to apply what we know in areas where change is being considered.

Articulating practice does not seek to suture, to close down understanding, but instead to maintain openness. A fixed notion of literacy, a singular standard, closes down understanding. If writing centers support the idea that literacy is singular (even my word processor reminds me of this when it flags literacies as a misspelling) and the idea that those who depart from a singular standard of literacy can be “fixed” by assigning them to the writing center, then they contribute to closing the system to difference. When writing centers imagine themselves as mediators between students and the institution, they attempt to suture a definition of literacy, one based on an external and authorized version. When writing centers focus on changing writers, they are also performing a mediating function, bringing the student to an acceptance of an externally authorized literacy. Such a practice is not mutual or dialogic. Although frequently writing center workers learn from their students and develop a greater appreciation of diverse literacies, the faculty who send the students remain unchanged. And often even though students may revise their papers to conform to the singular standard, they themselves are unchanged. When writing centers perform a mediating function, they cooperate with the overdetermined nature of discourse, its “attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre” (Laclau and Mouffe 112).

An articulatory approach to change depends on a restless searching for
ways to reshape the discursive terrain, to change the ways we actually talk about literacy, about students, about difference. Writing center scholars such as Olivia Archibald, Anne DiPardo, Tom Fox, Alice Gillam, Gail Okawa, Carol Severino, Mary Trachsel, Nancy Welch, Meg Woolbright, and others have made significant arguments about the limits of academic literacy and have offered more complicated representations of students. The next step is to bring this work into contact with those campus committees that are open to reform and with composition scholars who are reconsidering monologic practices of literacy. But above all, we need to acknowledge that literacy work is not innocent, that when we engage in literacy practices with others we are at the same time engaged in making or preserving knowledge, in community maintaining or community building, in changing or reproducing power relations.

The students who use writing centers and the students who work in writing centers can be active participants in helping us engage with rather than ignore the paradoxes at the heart of literacy work. To undertake this effort, writing center workers must find the time to develop as scholars who can reshape the discussion of literacy. Terranee Riley warns that with academic credibility in writing centers comes a loss of populism and advocacy (23), an orthodoxy that suppresses healthy expansion (25), and a loss of vitality due to lack of attention to workaday matters (26). Riley’s warnings can be used by some as a ready excuse to avoid scholarship, and the anti-intellectualism of our time can seep can under the writing center door. But Riley’s concerns can be accounted for in the work I am advocating.

Articulatory practice would make something of the conflicting expectations and contradictory positioning of the writing center, and its primary goals would be academic change, student advocacy that arises from everyday knowledge, and a questioning of orthodoxy that addresses the writing center’s relationship with literacy. By openly embracing the negotiation of conflicts created by multiple literacies; by ethnic, class, and racial heritage; by diverse value systems; by generational misunderstandings; by competing cultural assumptions, writing centers can be places where literacy is redefined as the ability to “work the borders between tradition and change, an ability to adapt and improvise and amalgamate” (Brandt, “Accumulating” 660). By moving into dialogue with those seeking to renew and remediate the system, writing centers will at the same time serve students more effectively by taking an active role in the effort to understand the ways literacy sustains, maintains, regulates, or improves our relationships with others.
Notes

1 I have told these students’ stories before when I referred to them by name. In this essay, I identify them by gender, race, religion, and class to call more attention to the ways these social constructions complicate their engagements with academic literacy.

2 If the white male son of parents who are both academics, whose mother is in fact a long-time writing center director, can be counted as mainstream, then I invoke Benjamin Grimm’s current difficulties in negotiating a position from which to speak and write in his Latina literature class as evidence. In one of the final classes of his undergraduate career, my son has encountered a situation where his experience is not automatically valued, where critiques of his contributions have silenced him. As curricula and faculties become more genuinely multicultural, such situations will occur more frequently.

3 At the university where I work, students are placed in an honors section of first-year composition if they enter with a verbal ACT score of 27 or higher, an SAT verbal score of 610 or higher, or a 4 or 5 on the Advanced Placement Test. If students pass this course with an A or a B, they are excused from the required second term of first-year composition.

4 Although my writing center experience has sensitized me to the ways these conflicts occur and the ways that students play the academic game of figuring out what the teacher wants, as a teacher I still organize courses to provide students with reading materials and writing assignments that contain or reinforce my own stance on important issues. I am certain that in many other even more tacit ways I convey the belief that it would be in their best academic interests to accept my stance. What I have learned to do only recently is to openly acknowledge the conflicts this common approach to teaching creates and to suggest ways that students might engage with those conflicts, including visiting the writing center to talk through the issues and explore options.

5 The complications of teaching in the contact zone are more vexed than I can account for here. Richard Miller, in his recent articles “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone” and “The Nervous System,” vividly illustrates the challenges that we face in constructing a pedagogical practice and scholarly rhetoric that seriously engages a dialogic intent.

6 I thank the many friends whose thoughtful comments have assisted my revisions, particularly Sylvia Matthews and Marilyn Cooper, the students who have sensitized me to the issues I try to address here, and Dave Healy and the WCJ reviewers, whose detailed engagement with my drafts have encouraged me to think through the implications of my argument. The shortcomings of the final version are entirely mine.
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