Writing Centers and the Politics of Location: A Response to Terrance Riley and Stephen M. North

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Power is, at its roots, telling our own stories. Without “good” stories to rely on, no minority or marginalized majority has a chance to change its status, or, more importantly, to identify and question the “bad” tales that create it.

—Susan Miller, Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition (1)

Susan Miller is right: for those who perceive themselves to be on the margins, power is indeed “telling our own stories” (1). But as the quotation marks that Miller uses to surround the terms “good” and “bad” imply, the question of what constitutes an enabling or marginalizing story is ideologically, culturally, and politically charged: one person’s revisionist history is another’s abandonment of tradition and values. In this essay I would like to look at two recent efforts to narrate new stories about writing centers: Terrance Riley’s “The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers” and Stephen M. North’s “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center.’” In their essays Riley and North attempt to step outside of conventional understandings of writing centers. Thus Riley challenges common-sense assumptions about the benefits of professionalization for writing centers, while North critiques his earlier “Idea of a Writing Center”—an essay that has done much to define writing center work for the last decade—as a “romantic idealization” (9).

As readers may be aware, Riley’s and North’s essays have engendered considerable controversy, both in the pages of this journal and on WCENTER’s electronic forum. In her response to Riley, for instance,

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Bobbie Silk charges him with “throw[ing out the baby] with the bath water” (186), while Cynthia Haynes-Burton observes that North’s rereading of his essay sounds “a cynical and defeatist alarm . . . [that leaves readers] discouraged and puzzled about the future of writing center work” (181). Comments such as these suggest to me that Riley and North are probing sites of discomfort and controversy that are central to readers’ conceptions of writing center theory and practice—so central that (in differing ways) their essays seem to some almost to call into question the very possibility of continuing such work.

Riley’s and North’s essays both draw upon and contribute to recent efforts to reread composition studies’ development as an academic discipline. It is interesting in this regard to recall the responses to Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition, Susan Miller’s influential—and controversial—critique of composition studies. As Miller indicates at the start of that study, she set out to write a “good” story, one that would enable composition studies to “identify and question the ‘bad’ tales” that had rendered “teachers and students of writing in American higher education . . . the subjects of a marginalizing and negative—but nonetheless widely believed—myth” (1). For Miller, a “good” story is necessarily one that is capable of “Seeing Things for What They Are,” (177; this phrase serves as the title of Miller’s last chapter). Such a clarifying vision involves, in Miller’s view, recognizing composition’s site as the debased and marginalized Other of literature and acknowledging writing teachers’ “self-sacrificial role” (15) as feminized “Sad Women in the Basement” (121; title of chapter four). Miller also argues that rather than effecting a significant paradigm shift in composition studies, the writing process movement has functioned primarily “as a way of granting composition a qualified academic legitimacy” (108).

Assertions such as these represent substantial challenges to conventional understandings of composition studies. So it is hardly surprising that just as some readers of Riley’s and North’s essays have challenged the story they narrate, Miller’s study has been similarly questioned. Thus while David Bartholomae characterized Textual Politics as “bold, powerful, important” (510) in his review for College Composition and Communication, Richard Larson was struck more by its “overpowering rhetorical assault on the field of the teaching of writing.” In Miller’s analysis there are, Larson observes in a review in Rhetoric Review, “no heroes, no survivors . . . and the prospects for future rescue . . . are both faint and uncertain” (356).

As the responses to Riley’s, North’s, and Miller’s efforts indicate, a story that represents itself as an enabling vision may nevertheless strike some readers as a harsh, and even marginalizing, tale. It’s tempting in such a situation to turn away from the story that has discomforted us, particularly if that story seems to be disconfirmed by our lived experience. And yet the comfort that we gain in so doing may come at a cost, for the site of dissonance
can often be the site of inquiry and of enriched understanding. I write this response to Riley’s and North’s essays because I want to encourage readers to turn toward, rather than away from, the difficult but important questions they raise. Riley and North ask readers to adopt perspectives that challenge understandings which are so deeply embedded as to seem commonsensical. In so doing, they provide opportunities for those committed to writing center work to interrogate the ideologies that silently inform our lived experience. As I hope to suggest, however, it is possible to benefit from Riley’s and North’s thought-provoking analyses without surrendering entirely to the story they narrate. As part of my analysis, then, I will attempt to reveal the multiple stories that, once exposed, may helpfully complicate our understanding of the story of writing centers.

Rereading the Story

[Theory is a kind of practice, sometimes a peculiar kind when it claims to escape practice.

—Steven Mailloux, Rhetorical Power (159)

Before turning to Riley’s and North’s essays, I should indicate the interests I bring to this subject. For some time I have been engaged in a project of disciplinary reflection, one that I hope can contribute to ongoing efforts to reread the story of composition studies. Central to my inquiry is a concern—one I share with a number of other scholars, including Louise Phelps, Stephen North, Ruth Ray, Kurt Spellmeyer, Patricia Harkin, Lester Faigley, and Susan Miller—about the relationship of theory and practice in composition studies. There are several ways I might contextualize this concern, but perhaps the most concise and relevant observation would emphasize my increasing awareness that it is not possible—or more accurately not helpful—to consider composition studies’ development as an academic discipline without attending to issues of professionalization and disciplinary legitimation.

Such a perspective encourages me to focus on the relationship of power and knowledge as embodied in a variety of disciplinary assumptions and practices, and to ask questions such as these: What counts as knowledge in composition studies? Who decides? Who is authorized to produce knowledge? How does knowledge circulate in our field, in the academy, and in allied educational institutions, such as the public schools? Rather than asking whether a particular theory is epistemologically and methodologically “correct,” for instance, questions such as these encourage me to ask how various theories—and theoretical debates—are constructed and function in the academy. In so doing, my understanding of the nature of theory and practice
has been altered, so that I now view what has often been termed a theory-practice conflict to be a practice-practice conflict, one that, given current assumptions within most educational institutions, generally privileges the discursive and material practices of those constructed as theorists over those constructed as practitioners.³

I have learned, in other words, to be suspicious of the claims that theory often makes for itself—such as the claim that theory is disinterested and objective. I have become suspicious, as well, of a number of conventional theoretical strategies, such as a reliance upon binaries and the construction of taxonomies. Such strategies undoubtedly have their uses, but I am now more aware of their inevitable doubleness: the impulse to taxonomize, for instance, often conjoins the impulse to hierarchize and exclude. I am also more conscious of the (perhaps inevitable) difficulty that much theoretical work has in honoring the situated nature of both our theories and our practices.

When I bring this perspective to bear on the development of composition studies during the last twenty years, I have come to some uncomfortable understandings. I have come to recognize, for instance, that an uneasy and generally unspoken relationship has existed between composition studies' desire for professional legitimacy and academic status and its sense of itself as having a more radical, more socially useful mission than that of more traditional disciplines; between its scholarly quest to generate—and legitimate—disciplinary knowledge and its curricular positioning in the academy as gatekeeper and certifier. As a field, composition studies has been quicker to announce revolutions that promise theoretical progress and pedagogical change than it has been to address such problems as the material conditions of teachers of writing, its inequitable relationship with teachers in the public schools, or the role that textbooks and other curricular and programmatic practices sometimes play in the commodification of theory and the devaluing of practice. And as those who work in writing centers are well aware, composition studies has engaged in its own internalized hierarchies of power and knowledge—hierarchies that have constructed many who work in writing centers as the Other of composition studies.

An Unpromising Future?

I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”

—Alisdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (216)

I have wished to establish the interests and positionings that I bring to Riley’s and North’s essays, for I am increasingly uncomfortable with employing strategies that seem to suggest that I can be “objective” in this or any other
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effort. I have also wanted to suggest the common ground I share with Riley and North, whom I see as raising important ethical, political, and rhetorical questions—questions that invite readers to ask themselves “What am I to do?” given writing centers’ rhetorical and material situation in the academy. With Alisdair Maclntyre, I believe that we can best respond to this question by raising the prior question, “Of what story or stories do . . . [we find ourselves] a part?” Maclntyre’s comment is also important to me because it recognizes the possibility of a multiplicity of stories—some of which, if they do not actually contradict, may at least provide paradoxical understandings about one’s practices and positionings.

Terrance Riley begins “The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers” with one such paradox: “that the least promising future we can imagine for ourselves and our writing centers is the very one we long for; that our pursuit of success and stability, as conventionally measured, may be our undoing” (20). Drawing upon an analysis of the professional development of three fields within English studies—American literature, literary theory, and composition studies—Riley warns that “the power that accompanies a rise in professional status is partly illusory; that . . . if those of us devoted to the writing center concept follow the example of other groups, seeking stability in professionalization, we will jeopardize the values that make our work meaningful” (21-22).

Riley’s emphasis on the importance of considering writing centers through the theoretical and historical lenses of disciplinary legitimation and professionalization strikes me as acute and compelling. I agree with him that we need to look hard at the typical “stages in the evolution of academic respectability”—at the losses as well as the gains that such respectability often entails (21). I agree, as well, when Riley cautions readers that writing centers’ opposition to (and, often, marginalization within) “established university culture” may cause us to believe that “precisely because . . . some degree of resistance is built into our collective enterprise, we feel capable of playing the hierarchical game and maintaining the project of countering the hierarchy” (21). Many in composition studies (including myself) have, I believe, at times felt that composition’s oppositional positioning in English departments and its commitment to literacy marked it as resistant. Finally, I appreciate Riley’s effort to connect the professional with the political and ideological—as he does, for instance, when he charts the development of American literature as a scholarly enterprise, one whose democratic agenda Riley believes early advocates turned away from in their effort to professionalize their field. Riley’s comments remind me that composition studies’ potentially radical commitment to literacy and to teaching—a commitment that it capitalized on in the 1970s when universities responded to what was then perceived to be a literacy crisis—could be similarly disciplined.

Riley is right, I believe, to warn the writing center community that
disciplines are inherently conservative, that they tend to discipline, rather than to encourage, progressive practices, and that they function as much to create and legitimate expertise as to generate knowledge. I disagree with Riley, however, in the lessons that he draws from his analysis of the history of professionalization in English studies. For me, both the history that Riley narrates and its lessons can never be as clear as he finds them, for where Riley sees “history” I see “histories.”

To clarify the difference I see between “history” and “histories,” I would turn to Peter Carino’s recent “Early Writing Centers: Toward a History.” In this study, Carino revisits the story that researchers have generally told about early writing centers, one that narrates “a neat march of progress from current-traditional gradgrindianism to theoretically sophisticated nurture,” suggesting that such a narrative oversimplifies what is in fact a more diverse past (104). Working with a variety of archival materials, and drawing upon both diachronic and synchronic methods, Carino is able to uncover the varied stories that most conventional analyses repress. Such an uncovering does not, Carino cautions, warrant a whole-scale reinterpretation of the history of writing centers. But it does require the recognition that “early centers . . . were a much more variegated and complex phenomenon than has been represented in writing center discourse” (104).

If the past holds more stories than conventional histories have narrated, might not such diversity also characterize the present? I believe that such is the case and that it is important to consider this diversity, particularly when making broad recommendations about what centers should and should not do. If we kept this diversity clearly in view we would recognize that the dangers and opportunities that professionalization offers a writing center staffed by teaching assistants in a major research university would differ substantially from those faced by a writing center staffed by undergraduate writing assistants in a small liberal arts college, or by part-time instructors in a community college.4

Just as important as this situational diversity is the philosophical diversity that exists among writing centers. Riley fears that “as we professionalize, less and less are we able to assert that our philosophy is liberatory and contrarian” (29). I am not sure, however, that all writing centers currently articulate—or enact—their philosophy in Riley’s terms. As Shamoon and Burns’ recent “Critique of Pure Tutoring” indicates, substantial disagreements exist even within social constructionist theory. In their essay, Shamoon and Burns argue that, counter to prevailing assumptions and practices, directive tutoring can be as empowering and as liberatory as non-directive or “pure” tutoring. The vigorous discussion on WCENTER following the publication of Shamoon and Burns’s article indicates that the question of how to enact a “liberatory and contrarian” philosophy in writing centers is far from resolved.
Once we leave the pages of our journals and books, the situation becomes even more complicated. I know of situations where writing centers are so inadequately funded that it is virtually impossible for the (part-time, and often temporary) director to engage in the kind of reflection and inquiry that enable the development and enactment of any coherent philosophy, much less one that is “liberatory and contrarian.” In such situations, writing centers are disciplined not by the process of professionalization that Riley describes but rather by their institutional location. Particularly when we are asking, as Riley asks, what writing centers should do to ensure a promising future, it seems important to acknowledge the extent to which writing centers currently narrate a variety of acutely situated stories. In some of these stories, professionalization may indeed represent a threat to a writing center’s integrity and vitality. In others, such hallmarks of professionalization as an adequate budget and full-time director might be the necessary grounding for their very development.

Though Riley recognizes that the fields whose development he chronicles were constructed by “many individuals, collectively and over a period of decades,” his argument tends to turn away from the multiplicity and situatedness inherent in this statement. Riley’s history does not and cannot acknowledge, for instance, the extent to which acts of resistance to conventional disciplinary assumptions and practices (both material and textual) have occurred and do occur in the academy. Such acts of resistance interrupt and complicate the relatively seamless history that Riley narrates. Admittedly, Riley does acknowledge the polemical, interested nature of his analysis, noting that he has “inevitably misrepresented the history of . . . the subdisciplines [he discusses] by reducing them so and by picking and choosing points of emphasis” (27). Riley recognizes the “ethical complexity of these histories,” observing that “American literature deserves a place in the curriculum. Theories of literature are useful. Composition ought to develop its own pedagogical traditions” (28). Riley’s argumentative strategies make it difficult, however, for him fully to confront that complexity.

The Question of Writing

*Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak.*

—Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (94)

Finally, it seems to me, Riley’s thought-provoking analysis gets caught up in conventional western categories—categories that for all his willingness to defamiliarize and deconstruct, he is unable to avoid. Perhaps the most
central of these is the binary of professional and amateur. The presence of this binary makes me suspicious, for to the extent that Riley can’t imagine anything other than the opposite of professionalism, as conventionally understood and enacted in the academy, his essay is structured—is disciplined—by the very binary that in other ways it wishes to challenge. That this is indeed the case is indicated by Riley’s conclusion, for the only “promising” future that he can imagine for writing centers is one that rejects assumptions and practices that traditionally have characterized academic professionalism. Those who work in writing centers should, Riley argues, “[f]all out of love with permanence; embrace transience. Stake [our] . . . reputation on service rather than on publication. Acknowledge that directing a writing center does not involve the kind of difficulties for which advanced degree preparation is necessary” (331-332).

As constructed in Riley’s essay, the professional/amateur binary serves—prematurely, I would argue—to resolve a number of complex ethical, political, and rhetorical issues. In saying this, I am being both less and more optimistic than Riley: less because I question his assumption that the majority of writing centers currently enact a “liberatory and contrarian” philosophy, and more because I believe that, despite its dangers, professionalization can bring benefits. Riley is right to caution those committed to writing centers that disciplinary knowledge can work to repress, that publication can be self-(and discipline-) serving rather than generative of new ideas and practices, that permanence can foster intellectual stagnation and moral complacency. But not always. For the absence of time to reflect upon one’s work (whether through conversation with peers or through scholarly dialogue) can also repress. And a lack of permanence can make it impossible to engage in meaningful work at all.

Riley’s willingness to so readily dismiss the personal, institutional, and pedagogical consequences that devolve from some writing centers’ appalling material situations is a signal to me of the extent to which his argument has become disengaged from situated analysis and has instead gotten caught up in the powerful urge toward generalization (and the development of a single, linearly-argued thesis) that typically drives argument in the west. An essay modeled on traditional academic argument, with its reliance on dichotomous, and often hierarchical, categories, has great difficulty enacting both/and arguments, much less embracing the paradoxical and contradictory. And yet, when we are dealing with activities as complicated—and as situated—as teaching, writing, and conferencing, we are missing a great deal if we exclude the paradoxical and the contradictory.

When I think about the situation of writing centers today, I don’t see the kind of clear choices that Riley does. Instead, I see both opportunities and dangers—opportunities and dangers that can be evaluated often only in very specific contexts. Will the development of Ph.D. dissertations on writing
centers lead to a “narrowing and limit[ing]” of writing centers, and to the creation of oppressive hierarchies within the writing center community (23)? I can imagine situations where the answer to that question might be yes: we all know academics whose professional training encouraged rigid, doctrinaire, hierarchical thoughts and actions. But the opportunity for sustained inquiry that advanced study provides may also lead to the kind of theorizing that enables individuals to critique, resist, and sometimes even change disciplinary assumptions and practices.

As I have attempted to think in different ways about the professional and institutional situation of writing centers, I have found David Kaufmann’s reflections on “the profession of theory” to be helpful. Like Riley, Kaufmann looks hard at the role that professionalization has played in the academy, noting that it has helped to make theory “the biggest growth industry in literary studies” (519). And, like Riley, Kaufmann is concerned with the relationship of the professional and the political, with the question of what counts as progressive theoretical and pedagogical academic work. Though the following excerpt from Kaufmann’s conclusion is framed in terms of theory, rather than of writing center work, it nevertheless speaks, I believe, to exigencies of our situation:

Each theoretical intervention works for several masters and achieves various ends. To practice theory is to help the very divisions and forms of domination that theory seeks to overcome. By the same token, however, to give up critical, truly critical thought in the academy would be to strangle such thought in the only cradle it has left and to sacrifice what we still have of our best hopes. What remains, then, is hardly the stuff of heady perorations: the desire for an integrity that will sell itself neither cheaply nor easily and the hardened edge of an irony that, in the words of one of our less fashionable poets, “will not scare.” (528)

There are, Kaufmann reminds us, no easy answers—and certainly no once-and-for-all resolutions—to the ethical, political, and rhetorical difficulties we face when we attempt to engage in progressive work in academic institutions. Simply by working in these institutions, in fact, we become, whether we wish to or not, part of the complex and paradoxical story that they narrate.

Revisiting “The Idea”

*These notes are the marks of a struggle to keep moving, a struggle for accountability.*

—Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location” (211)

If writing centers, as theoretical and pedagogical interventions, do
indeed work “for several masters and . . . [achieve] various ends,” how should those committed to writing centers respond to the question “What am I to do?” When I consider our present disciplinary moment, I am most struck by the need for greater attentiveness to what Adrienne Rich terms “the politics of location.” Such attentiveness would encourage us to acknowledge that our own desires, practices, and situations are inevitably mixed, that they contain tensions, and possibly even contradictions, that we may not wish to acknowledge. It also reminds us that those whom a specific situation constructs as “experts” have a particularly strong responsibility to critique the rhetoric, politics, and ethics of their discursive and material practices.

In “Revisiting ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’” (“Revisiting” hereafter), Stephen North makes just such an effort. It’s interesting to read North’s essay in dialogue with Riley’s, for depending upon how one responds to North’s arguments, one might view North’s essay as either a confirmation of or rebuttal to Riley’s vision of writing centers’ “unpromising future.” How one responds to North’s essay depends, perhaps even more than is usually the case, on how one reads it, for it articulates a particularly complex and even shifting argument, one that moves from a broad, generalized critique of his influential “The Idea of a Writing Center” (“The Idea” hereafter) to a situated analysis of the changes he has made in his own writing center as a consequence of these understandings. These changes include tying his university’s “Center directly to [SUNY Albany’s] Writing Sequence through the English major,” so that Center consultations are limited to the “approximately 10 faculty members, the 20 graduate students, and the 250 or so undergraduates that . . . [according to North, it] can actually, sanely, responsibly bring together” (“Revisiting” 17).

I commend North’s decision to subject his earlier essay to rigorous self-critique. At the time of its publication, “The Idea” appeared to many to narrate just the right kind of “good” story about writing centers, one that most definitely needed to be heard, and many continue to find the essay sustaining. Given this impact, and the role his essay has played in helping to define writing center work, North might easily have chosen to articulate the changes in his thinking by moving on to a different if related subject, rather than returning to his earlier work. I also commend North’s recognition that “institutional arrangements seem to me too idiosyncratic, and writing centers’ political visions too varied, for me to tell you where I think ‘we’—all writing center people—are going” (15). Even North’s attentiveness to the difficulty of the pronoun “we” in the previous quotation attests to his sensitivity to the politics of location, a politics that, as Rich observes, can render “even ordinary pronouns . . . a political problem” (224).

A good deal of the richness—and, for me at least, also the difficulty—of North’s essay derives from his effort to move back and forth between what might be termed macro- and micro-perspectives in his analysis. North takes
a systemic or macro-perspective when he insists that however progressive a writing center’s theory and practice is, that center exists not in isolation but in the intersection of a number of institutional systems. Thus, North observes, the idealized portrayal of the tutor/writer relationship in his earlier essay tends to “blind [tutors] . . . to, or deny for them, the extent to which they are (always) already enmeshed in a system or systems—educational, political, economic, social, and so on” (12). When North turns to the relationship of writing center and institution, he once again argues that his earlier essay naively overestimates writing centers’ potential role. Consequently, while “The Idea” envisions as a promising future one in which “writing centers [are] the centers of consciousness about writing on campuses” (446), North’s later essay paints a much darker picture:

Regardless of the commitment by a writing staff to reforming the larger institution, the tendency seems not for the center to become the locus of any larger consciousness. On the contrary . . . this particular romanticization of the writing center’s institutional potential may actually mask its complicity in what Elspeth Stuckey has called the violence of literacy. (15)

In working on this essay I have read this passage about writing centers and the violence of literacy many, many times—and each time I have done so I have paused. For although I agree with North that his earlier essay turned away from engaging the implications of writing centers’ institutional and ideological positionings, I have felt—particularly at moments such as this—that North’s self-critique comes dangerously close to simply reversing his earlier vision of writing centers. Reading North, I have struggled to articulate a position that would acknowledge the power of his critique but would nevertheless retain some of the aspirations articulated in his earlier essay. For though North indicates that “the general ideal . . . [of his earlier essay], perhaps, can be said to hold,” the rhetorical thrust of “Revisiting” tends, I believe, primarily to overturn his earlier work.

North’s decision to introduce his critique by equating his essay with the movie Dead Poets Society has the effect, for instance, of positioning it as a “grandiose, idealized” vision, terms North uses to characterize the movie (9). The problem-solution structure of the body of “Revisiting,” which balances critiques of four central passages from “The Idea” with four statements about the changes made at Albany’s Writing Center, also tends to position these statements as generalized solutions to the problems that North raises, even though North explicitly states that he does not intend for them to serve that purpose. As a consequence, in North’s essay there can seem to be only two alternatives—alternatives that position those who remain committed to a model of writing centers as serving a broad student population as the dupes of ideology, or “(universal) staff literacy scapegoat[s]” (18).
The Question of Writing, Reprised

*What we “look for” is unfortunately what we shall find.*

—Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (141)

I believe North when he says in “Revisiting” that he does not intend to argue that all writing centers should follow the model he and his colleagues have adopted. To the extent that my analysis accurately characterizes an interpretive dilemma that North’s analysis creates for some readers, it exposes difficulties I have come to believe are inherent in much academic discourse (including, undoubtedly, my own). In “Revisiting,” for instance, North primarily “look[s] for” ways in which “The Idea” fails to take seriously writing centers’ institutional and ideological positioning; in so doing, he helpfully exposes a number of limitations, such as his earlier essay’s portrayal of both writers and tutors as unsituated, free agents. But what if North had also “looked for” such limitations in his reconfigured writing center? In one sense, he does do this, for he is careful to acknowledge that the changes he and his colleagues have made are not a panacea: at several moments in his essay he indicates that they will “surely generate as many new tensions as new opportunities” (16). In this sense, “Revisiting” is much more open to difficulty and uncertainty than North’s earlier essay was. But a more detailed analysis of some of these possible tensions might have made it clearer that North is not narrating a single “good” story for writing centers.

Consider, for instance, the first point that North makes about his reconfigured writing center. North wants, he says, “a situation in which writers are, in fact, motivated about, engaged in their writing (16),” and he believes that students’ participation in SUNY Albany’s Writing Sequence will enable that. I would agree with North that majors enrolled in a coherent course of study are likely to be more motivated than the varied students who come to most writing centers—and also more knowledgeable about the writing center’s mission (North’s second point). But will that motivation necessarily differ dramatically from that of other students who are situated in “the school culture” (11)?

In critiquing “The Idea,” North challenges that essay’s uncomplicated portrayal of writers, arguing that in fact students generally are not “deeply engaged with their material . . . really motivated to write” but rather are “motivated to (say) finish writing . . . to have the writing they submit for a class win them a good grade” (10). My own experience with students tells me that even deeply committed students (such as students in my English department’s M.A. program) bring multiple, and even conflicting motivations, to their writing. They often are committed to their writing—though
the nature and intensity of that commitment can, I believe, vary considerably depending upon a number of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. But these students are also, as North asks us to remember, situated in "the school culture" (11). Given the way that school culture values performance (privileging product over process), and given the exigencies of students' own lives (the competing demands they face, their lack of time, the requirement that they must respond to teachers' varying expectations and to assignments that they might otherwise not wish to address), even these students may want and need simply "to be finished with writing" (10).

As a consequence, there will, I believe, always be a tension between writing centers' commitment to a process-based, student-centered pedagogy and the desires and exigencies that even the most thoughtful, motivated, and disciplined students bring to our centers. The changes North has effected for his writing center address this tension—and in so doing helpfully enact a politics of location—but they resituate it rather than resolve it. Such is also the case, I would argue, with the question of the extent to which writing centers are complicit in what North terms "the violence of literacy" (15). Certain writing center configurations do actively support such violence: centers that define their mission as serving only remedial students and that rely primarily on a "skills and drills" methodology. But given the ideologies of literacy that circulate both in the larger culture and in our educational institutions, I doubt that any writing center can entirely avoid being in some way identified with the "wrongness" of illiteracy (15). By limiting its services only to students in SUNY Albany's Writing Sequence, for instance, North's writing center does indeed avoid serving as institutional "conscience, savior, or sacrificial victim" (17). But unless SUNY Albany's English department differs significantly from my own, his writing center cannot escape tensions that grow out of and reflect faculty members' differing understandings of the nature of literacy and its relationship to literature. To the extent that some English department faculty members still view "language differences as a wrongness" (15) and still maintain what North in "The Idea" terms "a second layer of ignorance" (433) about writing center work, such work will remain contested and in some ways marginalized.

Earlier I indicated that depending upon how one reads North's "Revisiting" one might view it as a confirmation or denial of Riley's argument. My own understanding is that although readers would of course bring different orienting perspectives to this question, it is not possible on the basis of North's essay to make this determination, for, as a politics of location would suggest, such a judgment would necessarily be acutely situated. SUNY Albany's reconfigured writing center could indeed represent a retreat from the goals of mass literacy into a narrow professionalized agenda. Or it could represent, as North argues in his response to Haynes-Burton, a wise strategy that is part of "a continuing (re)negotiation over the place of writing in higher
education” (“Letter” 183). The question of what constitutes progressive work in the academy is not easily or neatly resolved. Though it is human to desire the sense of certainty that a single “good” story can provide, our situations may be too complex—and even paradoxical and contradictory—to admit of such a guarantee.

Notes Toward a Politics of Location

As . . . theorizing is presently practiced, we seem to lose sight of the possibility that each of our conceptions of a practice may capture an aspect of a very complex and contradictory set of social relations. Confronted with complex and changing relations, we try to reduce these to simple, unified, and undifferentiated wholes. We search for closure or the right answer or the “motor” of the history of . . . domination.

—Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West (179)

Although Jane Flax’s comments about theorizing are addressed primarily to feminists, they serve as a reminder, I believe, of issues that those committed to writing centers might helpfully contemplate. For as I hope is clear, even though North’s position differs considerably from that of Riley, North, too, in certain respects becomes caught up in the momentum of his argument. Like Riley, for instance, North seems at times to construct his argument through binary thinking, as in his analysis of writing centers’ possible complicity in “the violence of literacy” (15). And North’s adherence to the conventions of academic writing causes him to focus his critique primarily upon those ideas he wishes to reject, rather than upon his current proposal.

But should we be surprised that such is the case? I believe not. For although poststructuralist and postmodern critiques have challenged conventional understandings of the relationship of knowledge and language, only recently have scholars such as Kaufmann, Cintron, Gore, Watkins, and others focused this critique upon conventional scholarly assumptions and practices. And the question of what constitutes effective resistance to such assumptions and practices is hardly clear. Jane Flax begins the concluding chapter of Thinking Fragments, for instance, with this statement:

A fundamental and unresolved question pervading this book is how to justify—or even frame—theoretical and narrative choices (including my own) without recourse to “truth” or domination. I am convinced we can and should justify our choices to ourselves and others, but what forms these justifications can meaningfully assume is not clear to me. I do not find it helpful to think about this question
in terms of a search for "less false" representations because postmodernist critiques of representation are too compelling. Rather I would argue it is both necessary and difficult to displace truth/falsity with problems of meaning(s). (222)

In this essay I have attempted to engage a number of "problems of meaning(s)" in Riley's and North's essays. I have done so knowing that my own effort can hardly hope to escape such difficulties.

In this response to Riley's and North's essays, I have attempted to acknowledge the heuristic value of the questions they ask and of the perspectives they bring to writing center work, while at the same time suggesting alternate readings of the story each essay narrates—readings that I hope expand, rather than limit, the implications of their analysis. I have undertaken this project primarily because of my respect for Riley's and North's essays, which pose the kind of risk-taking, thought-provoking questions that those committed to writing centers need to address. Riley's and North's essays provide a powerful reminder that those committed to writing centers live and work in institutional and professional worlds of great complexity and difficulty, worlds that provide both opportunities and dangers.

I have also wished to call attention to the potential helpfulness of attempting to read against the grain of conventional scholarly practices. Such a rereading encourages us to attend to, rather than diminish, the substantial gap that exists between our theories and the "very complex and contradictory set of social relations" that characterizes situated practice (Flax 179). It reminds us, as well, that the will to knowledge and the will to power are inextricably linked—and that those who theorize might do well to attend more fully to the rhetoric of our own practices. To what extent, for instance, do contemporary theoretical practices encourage the development of oppositions that turn away from, rather than acknowledge, the complexity and situatedness of that which is being discussed? How attentive are scholars to the ways in which these scholarly debates circulate throughout our educational institutions? How do phrases like "research says" and "the nature of" function to mask the rhetoricty of scholarly arguments? (Cintron passim)

Thinking of my own previous scholarly writing, I can see ways in which greater attention to the issues I have just raised would have enriched that work. And yet, clearly, the kind of postmodern suspicioning of representation that the questions I have just raised exemplify could—if taken too far—paralyze. Scholars need to develop categories to aid their thinking, to generalize, to argue, to take stands and make decisions. But perhaps we can do so with more attentiveness to the rhetoric of our own practices than in the past. What might happen, for instance, if theorists who rely upon binaries and/or taxonomies to structure their arguments attempted, however briefly, to expose the ways in which these constructs inevitably essentialize? What if
a critique of one's own assumptions and methodology became as common a practice as a review of the literature? What if more scholars followed North's practice of critiquing earlier work, and in so doing challenged what Evan Watkins, in *Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, terms "ideologies of 'the new' as a privileged form of value" in the academy (15)?

I genuinely do not know the answer to these questions. For scholarly practice itself is too various—and too situated—to admit of generalization (much less prophecy). I am aware, as well, of the extent to which institutional ideologies can co-opt or in other ways modify practices designed to resist, and possibly even change, these ideologies. In *The Struggle for Pedagogies: Critical and Feminist Discourses as Regimes of Truth*, for instance, Jennifer Gore asks theorists arguing for (and against) various oppositional pedagogies to reflect upon the extent to which these arguments constrain or dissipate theorists' ability to effect positive changes in actual classroom practices—particularly when the language these theorists employ strikes the practitioners whose interests theorists see themselves serving as alienating or oppressive.

With Gore, then, I believe that "there are no inherently liberating practices or discourses" (58). The mere act of writing a narrative (instead of developing a more traditional, thesis-driven argument) is no more automatically progressive or enabling than is the act of inviting students in a classroom to draw their chairs into a circle, rather than sitting in a traditional block of teacher-directed chairs. It's what happens in that narrative, and in that classroom, that matters: who speaks, why, to what effect, and with what sensitivity (or absence thereof) to both speakers' and auditors' rhetorical situations. It is for this reason that I conclude this essay not with an argument for the necessity of changes in scholarly practice, but rather with the observation that with every talk we give and with each essay or book we write, we are constructing our own scholarly practices. The question of whether a particular practice is enabling or oppressive, enlightening or limiting, is a situated question, one that we must enact rather than decide once and for all. As a consequence, I call upon the words that Adrienne Rich used to conclude "Notes toward a Politics of Location" to close this discussion: "This is the end of these notes, but it is not an ending" (231).

**Notes**

I would like to dedicate this effort to my colleague Jon Olson, OSU's Writing Center Coordinator, who provided thoughtful responses to countless drafts of this essay. By his actions and insights, Jon has not only shown me what it means to be attentive to the politics of one's location but has also enabled and enriched my life at the Center for Writing and Learning. I would also like to thank Dave Healy for encouraging me to revise this essay, which was originally presented at the 1995 NWCA Conference, and the anonymous reviewers of *WCF* for their suggestions for revision.
My current project is very much a work in progress. Readers interested in understanding its context might consult two earlier essays that have helped me develop the ideas I am now pursuing: "Reading the Writing Process," and "Teaching Writing." Andrea Lunsford's and my "Representing Audience: 'Successful' Discourse and Disciplinary Critique," forthcoming in CCC, also raises a number of issues that are central to my inquiry.

Such an understanding emphasizes the importance of reconceiving the nature and relationship of theory and practice in the academy. I no longer believe, however, that difficulties that are often identified with theory-practice issues can be resolved primarily at the level of theory. Without attention to the practice of theorizing, well-intentioned efforts to articulate an enabling vision of the theory-practice relationship can serve, ironically, to reinforce theory's privileged status within the academy.

Dave Healy's recent essay, "In the Temple of the Familiar: The Writing Center as Church," is, among other things, a call to recognize the situatedness of writing centers by noticing the ways writing centers are like churches. For both institutions, demographic conditions may have as much influence on practice as does ideology, and differing demographics or situatedness render suspect the kinds of broad-stroke generalizations we are sometimes prone to make about writing center practice.

Even if a writing center has succeeded in becoming a center of consciousness about writing on its campus, as North suggests some have, few can hope to resolve what North characterizes as problems of "scale and image" (14). Since North presents these as generalized problems that writing centers should address—and since he presents only one writing center configuration that he believes succeeds in doing so—readers may thus feel that no other supportable alternative exists.

I thought of this tension as I struggled to complete this essay, which was much more difficult to write—and took much longer to complete—than I had anticipated. At one point when thanking Jon Olson for his response to a draft of this essay, I found myself saying, only partly in jest, "I'm so grateful, Jon, that you didn't follow usual writing center practice and instead just got right in there and mucked about in my writing. I've got to finish this essay!"

This is, of course, the title of Rich's much-discussed essay. I have appropriated it to head the final section of this essay in order to indicate my awareness of the provisional, tentative nature of my efforts.

Within feminist theory, for instance, a vigorous debate is underway about the helpfulness of what Nancy K. Miller has termed "personal criticism," criticism that "entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism" (1).
In “Wearing a Pith Helmet at a Sly Angle: Or, Can Writing Researchers Do Ethnography in a Postmodern Era?,” Ralph Cintron comments on the helpfulness of recalling that “academic debates are to a significant degree performances. Differences—and they do exist—push themselves forward by creating caricatures of each other. Although it may seem paradoxical, differences are deeply relational: to denounce the other’s position is to announce one’s own” (376). Such an understanding leads not to the devaluation of scholarly work, Cintron argues, but rather to the recognition that scholarly debates are “a kind of spectacle to be doubted the way we doubt the reality of a stage play but, nevertheless, find insight and meaning in its performance” (376).

One issue such a question raises is the extent to which revolutions in theory do or do not affect actual classroom practices. In “Writing as Collaboration,” for instance, James Reither and Douglas Vipond observe that although “the topic of writing as a social process has been a hot one in the last few years . . . little substantive change in either course design or classroom practice has come about that can be said to result directly from this reconsideration of the nature of writing” (855).

Works Cited


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