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The National Writing Centers Association as Mooring: A Personal History of the First Decade¹

Joyce Kinkead

To begin recounting a history of the National Writing Centers Association, I invoke the words of Eugene O'Neill. About the time the NWCA was forming in 1982, I was acting in a campus production of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Still with me are the lines of one of its characters: "There is no present, no future. Only the past. You can't get away from it." Although more pessimistic in tone than is suitable for a celebration of NWCA, these lines suggest that the past is always with us, and, in fact, I would argue that we do not want to get away from our past as an organization, not just because "if we do not remember our past we are doomed to repeat it," but because knowing our past helps us know ourselves.

To that end, I want to address some basic questions: Why is there a national organization for writing centers? What road has led us to plans for a third (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference? Why was CCCC not enough? Why was Writing Program Administration (WPA)—established prior to NWCA—insufficient? What were the conditions that led to the charter of NWCA in 1982? In recounting this chronicle, I stress that this a personal history, gathered from a number of sources, including back issues of *The Writing Center Journal* and *Writing Lab Newsletter*, convention programs and proceedings, nine years of NWCA minutes when I served as executive secretary, miscellaneous correspondence, and a fallible memory. Finally, I was one of several others present at the beginning, and I acknowledge they could tell this story as well—if not better—than I.

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Historical Context: 1971-79

To understand the chartering of the NWCA, it is necessary to review briefly the historical context of the previous decade. Before 1973, writing centers did exist, and Peter Carino has done much to document that early history. However, Steward and Croft note that their ERIC search of 1969 “turned up a single article about a then-existing lab.” Besides the early University of Iowa Writing Laboratory, going on sixty years of age, early 1970s labs included the University of Michigan-Flint (1971), Berkeley (1973), the Brooklyn College Writing Center (1973), and Purdue (1975). During this time of bell bottoms, the 18-year-old voting movement, and Ken Macrorie’s *A Vulnerable Teacher*, the “laboratory approach to writing” meant peer tutoring either in a centralized room or in the classroom itself (Laque and Sherwood 7).

In 1973, the CCCC charged a committee to investigate skills centers and the “degree to which they promote and/or hinder the objectives of English courses” (Conference 4). Two fears rested at the heart of this survey: 1) that teachers would be replaced by mechanized programs, and 2) that skills centers “care only about the mechanical aspects of writing” (16). The resulting report, “Learning Skills Centers,” indicates that since skills center sessions began at NCTE and CCCC in 1971, presentations shifted from discussing grammar and sentence structure to writing process pedagogy, and the people involved shifted from being instructors who failed students to lab staff no longer responsible for evaluation who became advocates for writers. Labs initially seduced by programmed instruction increasingly left that material in supply closets (15). In brief, the news was heartening to CCCC.

By 1978, “a College English Association survey of composition programs found several hundred schools listing writing labs as part of their instructional method” (Steward and Croft 2). Hawkins and Brooks describe the increase in the number of writing centers this way: “Today’s writing centers were not conceived in the most orderly and organized fashion. It has been a chaotic beginning. . . . [S]ome would question our future” (vii). While the impetus for these early centers often was remedial instruction, there was a growing feeling that a writing center might serve the entire campus community and even beyond.

At the 1977 CCCC, a group of sixty writing center directors decided they needed more contact than was offered by an annual meeting (Harris, “Growing Pains” 2), so Muriel Harris took out pencil and paper, collected names and addresses, and in April the first issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* appeared, produced on a Sears typewriter, cut and pasted—somewhat askew—at Mickey’s kitchen table. Its first page included a now-familiar plea for a dollar contribution to “mollify” the departmental “keeper of the budget.”

Writing Centers Association Begins—1979

A special interest group of writing lab directors was organized by Harris for the 1979 and 1980 CCCC and became an annual event, including a materials exchange table. Topics of these sessions ranged from a “Unified Records System” to “Toward Academic Status for Writing Lab Directors” (1981 CCCC program). A representative handout from the materials table, called a “Sketchbook” from the Writer’s Gallery at Lincoln High School (Nebraska), promised students: “When you have completed this sketchbook, you will be able to correctly use the comma before coordinating conjunctions in compound sentences.”

Also in 1979—in hindsight, a benchmark year—a group of directors in what is now called the East Central region decided to organize a spring meeting. The Writing Centers Association met for the first time that May; from this group, the NWCA would eventually arise. At the CCCC that had just taken place in Minneapolis, a resolution on the professional status of full-time instructors of composition calling for equality in salary and tenure status had been passed, and Mildred Steele of Central College in Pella, Iowa asked in the December *WLN* if “others feel as I do” that writing lab directors should be “assured the same kind of protection.” (A resolution on the status of writing lab professionals was passed at the 1981 CCCC, a topic revisited in 1987 with a second resolution authored by Jay Jacoby.) Also in 1979, the *Journal of Basic Writing* began, and the *WPA Newsletter* became a new refereed journal—*WPA: Writing Program Administration*, edited by Kenneth Bruffee.

Only a year later, the *WLN* had grown from its inaugural issue of two pages to six, charged \$3, included cartoons by tutor Bill Demaree on “Great Moments in Writing Lab History,” noted rare Ph.D. programs with an emphasis in rhetoric and composition, and reached over 650 subscribers (February 1980 issue). Also in 1980, Lil Brannon and Stephen North began *The Writing Center Journal*, in which they posed the question, “Why another journal in the teaching of writing?” and answered it in two parts: scholarly and political. They wrote optimistically that it is in “these centers that great new discoveries will be, are being, made: ways of teaching composing, intervening in it, changing it. Writing centers provide, in short, opportunities for teaching and research that classrooms simply cannot” (1). Referring to writing centers as being in an “adolescent” stage of growth, they pointed out that pedagogical movements—the writing center being one such movement—are often short-lived, and a journal is an “outward sign of a growing professional legitimacy (1).”

By 1981, the *WLN* had over 1,000 subscribers, and several books focusing on writing centers appeared: Hawkins and Brooks’ *Improving Writing Skills*, Harris’s *Tutoring Writing*, Steward and Croft’s *The Writing*

Laboratory, plus a peer tutor's journal from the Bay Area Writing Project at Berkeley. During the next two CCCCs, conversations among those attending the Writing Lab Directors Special Interest Sessions turned increasingly toward organizing a national group. Taking the lead, Nancy McCracken (then director of the writing center at Youngstown State University) contacted NCTE to obtain information about forming an Assembly, a status granted in November, 1982. In the December *WLN*, she issued a call to "anyone who is involved in or organizing a regional writing centers association . . . to discuss membership in the National Writing Centers Association—an NCTE assembly" (6).

The organizers of the Fifth Annual Conference of the Writing Centers Association, held at Purdue in May 1983, may not have realized how prophetic its theme—"New Directions, New Connections"—turned out to be, for it was at that meeting that nominations for the inaugural NWCA Executive Board were taken from the floor during the business meeting of the WCA, shortly to become the East Central WCA. As president of the WCA, McCracken became acting president of the national organization until a time when a slate of officers could be elected.

The National Writing Centers Association Convenes—1983

In a September, 1983 *WLN* article, "News from the National WCA," McCracken writes that membership dues are \$1 and defines the assembly:

Members from all regions of the country elect a National Executive Board, vote on Position Statements of the NWCA, and elect one or more members of the NCTE Board of Directors to represent interests of writing centers. . . . The Executive Board, to be elected this October, will direct future activities of the NWCA, including: (1) establishing a network among the regions for sharing of research and conference information, and (2) formulating position statements, for membership approval, on matters of professional interest to writing centers—such as academic freedom, assessment and evaluation, professional status, training and development. ("News" 6)

The ballot for the board resulted in the following charter members, largely located east of the Mississippi: Mary K. Croft, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point; Diana George, Michigan Technological University; Jeanette Harris, Texas Tech University; Jay Jacoby, University of North Carolina-Charlotte; Harvey Kail, University of Maine; Joyce Kinkead, Utah State University; Nancy McCracken, Youngstown State University; Janice G. Neuleib, Illinois State University; Marcia Silver, Brooklyn College; and Jeanne Simpson, Eastern Illinois University.

The NWCA's first formal appearance occurred at the NCTE Convention in Denver, a one-day workshop filled to its capacity of 170 and titled "Moving Out from the Center," featuring presentations on research in the writing center, computers, the writing center as hub of WAC programs, teacher education, secondary school writing centers, and a position statement on professional concerns. The first business meeting took place the preceding evening when the newly-elected board members edited and approved a constitution for the National Writing Centers Assembly, elected officers—Nancy McCracken, President; Jeanette Harris, Vice-President; Joyce Kinkead, Executive Secretary; Mary K. Croft, Recording Secretary—and developed committees to oversee professional concerns, publications, and research. Professional concerns included problems such as "loss of lab." Subcommittees on tutors, two-year colleges, and K-12 writing centers were formed. According to the secretary's minutes, the committees agreed to "meet at the 4 Cs . . . to recruit members, more specifically identify functions, and begin deliberations."

A few months later at the 1985 CCCC meeting in New York—a conference marked by blizzard, trains at a standstill, and Broadway's *Noises Off*—the NWCA had a membership of 310, a treasury of \$665, official stationery, and an agreement from the editors of *WLN* and *WCJ* to become official NWCA publications, each retaining strong editorial authority. Also in the works were awards for outstanding research and service, a committee chaired by Diana George.² McCracken suggested in a letter to board members following CCCC (10 April 1984) that "NWCA sponsor the Special Interest Session at CCCC," which had been organized informally, the chair being whomever had arranged the materials exchange table the previous year. Not until 1986, when Jeanne Simpson chaired this session, did it move formally to NWCA-affiliated status.

Early Issues: Representation, Regions, Relationships

Quickly, the NWCA declared its territory, making claims on the professional landscape of writing centers. For instance, the fledgling organization officially designated at its 1984 board meeting in Detroit at NCTE that a high school representative be added, heading off the possibility of a parallel group being started for elementary and secondary school writing centers. Two-year college representation had been already included. Jeanette Harris and I noted at this meeting that we had been selected as editors of *The Writing Center Journal*. The new editors added an annual "checklist of writing center scholarship" compiled by Jay Jacoby, made it a refereed journal, and called on NWCA members as an editorial board. Some discussion ensued about making the *WLN* a referred publication, but members noted that the newsletter is like a kaffeeklatsch and "you cannot have a refereed kaffeeklatsch." The revised constitution of the Assembly³

added regional representatives and made the editors of *WLN* and *WCJ* ex-officio members. A nationwide writing center directory and a position statement on the role of writing center personnel⁴ were two projects listed in the 1984 annual report on affiliate activities sent to NCTE.

Obviously, some regionals have had a longer history than the national association, most notably the East Central group (formerly the Writing Centers Association), which suffered some disruption and, possibly, resentment in the move from national to regional status, confounded early on by a muddled collection of membership dues.⁵ Other regionals also preceded the national organization. Two years after WCA formed in 1979, the Southeast WCA began meeting, followed by the Midwest WCA in October, 1982; the Texas WCA in March, 1983; and the Rocky Mountain WCA in June, 1983. After the NWCA's first meeting in November, 1983, New England and Mid-Atlantic regionals began organizing at the instigation of Harvey Kail and Marcia Silver. Irene Lurkis Clark convened a Pacific association in 1985.

Regional associations were of some concern because of overlap of states, particularly muddy between the Midwest and East Central. The issue of regional boundaries and map making appears in minutes of NWCA periodically as "the continuing dilemma of regional association boundaries" (11/25/85), and a lengthy discussion resulted in polling the membership (3/22/90) about a draft map, accompanied by a carefully worded statement that the national was seeking information, not imposing boundaries. The causes of the "map problem," as it came to be termed, were two: members inquired "to which regional do I belong," and the NWCA wondered how to insure accurate regional representation on the board. Eventually, the NWCA opted for a decentralized governance approach, leaving it to the regionals to figure out their own appropriate boundaries and representatives, keeping in mind the early tense history between the national and earlier-organized regionals.

Changes in the offices of NWCA included the deletion of a recording secretary in November, 1984 and the addition of a second vice-president in 1988, as well as dividing the duties of planning the NWCA-sponsored sessions at NCTE and CCCC. Initially, membership on the board was restricted to directors of writing centers, but the constitution was amended to those with "demonstrated interest and experience teaching in writing centers" (1984). Because NWCA originally organized at NCTE conventions, its initial constitution specified the November meeting as the official time and place, later changed to CCCC at the board meeting of November 18, 1984. (In actuality, the NWCA Board now meets at all three conferences—CCCC, NCTE, and NWCA—mindful that the secondary school membership is more likely to attend NCTE and the college membership more likely to attend CCCC. The question of where substantive business occurs continues as an issue.)

The Roles of NWCA

In considering my initial question about why a national association for writing centers, several reasons appear. First, CCCC did not entirely meet the needs of this special interest group. I suspect that writing lab directors attending CCCC in the 1970s did not find sufficient sessions on their special interests and also felt that proposals for sessions were viewed by conference organizers as peripheral. In addition, the CCCC leadership was not represented by writing center staff. The WPA, a more specialized group that attempted to be inclusive of writing center directors, focused primarily on directors of composition programs, not writing centers. In this arena, the NWCA provided a legitimate professional organization for writing center directors who wanted to focus exclusively on the concerns of this membership. This political reason, similar to the impetus Brannon and North cite in establishing *WCJ*, had effects in the center as well as beyond. A network of writing center personnel formed, offering dialogue about problems and successes, sharing research, and gaining information about how to best present funding requests.

The NWCA thus saw itself in an advocacy role, offering the authority of a professional organization. Giving awards for outstanding research and service—followed by letters of commendation to the winners and their administrators, plus press releases—was one way to provide that validity. Likewise, grants to graduate students focusing on writing centers in their dissertations were created to reward them and also to provide more writing center entries in DAL. Providing advice via starter kits on setting up a writing center increased the number of writing centers, the NWCA taking on an evangelistic role. NWCA members and nonmembers made frequent requests to the secretary for information, such as the following letter I received in 1984:

I have been appointed Director of the Writing Center at the University of Tulsa beginning this fall. Our Writing Center is staffed and directed by graduate students, and we have little faculty assistance, especially regarding new ideas and procedures in the operation of a Writing Center. We are desperate for material, particularly anything to do with ESL. . . . Any suggestions . . . would be gratefully received by our bewildered staff. (Sharon A. Winn, 23 May 1984)

Written requests and telephone calls were common, and occasionally an NWCA member would drop by my office in Logan—perhaps on a summer family camping trip—to ask about setting up a writing center.

In some respects, the NWCA saw itself as something of a labor union, offering professional support to those whose labs or positions were in crisis. I sometimes fantasize about an inspirational poster with Mickey Harris's

intense portrait, arm upraised, and the caption, "writing lab directors unite." By coming together, writing centers become more powerful, locally and nationally. The two different NCTE resolutions on the status of writing lab directors are evidence of this NWCA role. Lobbying to get as many writing center proposals as possible accepted to NCTE and CCCC was and continues to be a priority. Quite simply, one goal was to make sure writing centers lasted. Although Hawkins and Brooks pondered that "such extra-classroom efforts and remedial classes have too long a history for us to suggest that the next ten years will bring us the insight and skill to do away with our need for all the help we can get in teaching students to write" (99), there was some feeling in 1981 that the state of writing centers might be perilous.

Yet another mission of NWCA was to champion theory and praxis, ranging from the process movement of the 1970s to the social constructionism of more recent times. Often based in pragmatism, writing centers can be what Michael Spooner calls a "hothouse of knowledge-making" serving a clientele "as diverse as ESL . . . , WAC . . . , basic writers, continuing ed writers, as well as run-of-the-mill undergrad writers" and offering "face-to-face tutoring, on-line support, research opportunities, teaching opportunities, faculty workshops" (3) plus a range of other services. The checklist of writing center scholarship, originally published annually in *The Writing Center Journal*, was meant to quantify and lend credence to the legitimacy role mentioned earlier, as one way to develop the intellectual capital of the profession.

NWCA also provides a social forum. A term sometimes applied to *WLN*, "kaffeeklatsch," is appropriate to NWCA as well. On the other hand, given the popularity of *WCENTER* since its instigation by Lady Falls Brown in 1991, perhaps "network" has become a more useful term. Typically somewhat isolated on campuses by the nature of their roles, directors of writing centers find on *WCENTER* a large community of people in similar circumstances. It might be fair to say that a writing center is constructed at least in part as a result of these electronic conversations as users on the information highway call for advice in asking why student writing center use decreases during spring term, how tutors should deal with essays written on sensitive issues, or what to include in a tutor seminar. Nowhere in the bylaws of the NWCA will these reasons for its existence be made explicit, but they are there, unwritten, evidenced by the actions of the organization.

The last set of minutes that I wrote for NWCA occurred at the NCTE meeting in Atlanta in 1990 and reported a membership of 830 with a healthy treasury. Four years later, the first National Writing Centers Association Conference was yet another example of the maturity of the organization. In maturity, there is stability, but there is also the danger of becoming mired in tradition, of becoming static. We would do well as an assemblage to remember that NWCA was created because other groups did not satisfacto-

rily meet our needs. To remain dynamic, NWCA must listen to its members, make explicit its goals, communicate well, and plan strategically for the future.

To look into the crystal ball of our future, we have only to analyze similar organizations older than the NWCA. While CCCC has grown tremendously, it, too, began as a comfortable home for a special-interest group—perhaps more cocktail party than kaffeeklatsch—and has diversified into multiple focus groups, losing some of the coziness of its early days. Writing Program Administrators (WPA) has grown as well and continues to rely upon tried and true events such as the summer workshops for new administrators. Both CCCC and WPA sought official sessions at the MLA to extend their sphere of influence. The holding of a national conference focused solely on writing centers is an example of a separatist move. A challenge for writing center specialists will be to continue to support the focused conferences and journals while maintaining a profile in the more mainstream journals such as *CCC*, *College English*, and even higher education journals such as *College Teaching and Change*.

While WCENTER does much to ensure a sense of community among its members, no doubt old-timers of NWCA will begin to talk sentimentally about the “early days” of the organization when “everyone knew everyone else.” It is to be expected that splinter groups within the organization will appear, a natural part of growing pains. As a group, we are most likely more cynical than we were a decade ago when we embraced the optimism of North and Brannon’s view of “great new discoveries” being within our reach.

While I tend to view writing centers as having moved away from adolescence and into maturity, some of our public personae and statements do not mirror a mature view. This manifests itself at meetings with what I call a “celebration of marginality.” Messages that focus on what is being done to us (e.g., limited space and funding), rather than what we do well, place writing centers in a reactive rather than proactive stance. Perhaps this is not surprising in an age when politics pervade academic conversation. I am not suggesting that writing center personnel slather on silly happy faces, spout cheery thoughts, and ignore all negative reports like some kind of Stepford Staff. Rather, I suggest that our image is determined by us, and if the image we project is that of strong, capable, wise, and caring teachers, then that is how we will be perceived. We need to share our success stories with our various publics, to instill confidence in a way of teaching and learning that lies at the heart of writing center practice, and to provide leadership whenever the opportunity arises. It is through such strength and resilience that we can be most effective in our local and national academic communities and can help place our writing centers at the core of academe.

Over ten years ago, a group of individuals created an organization to benefit the profession as a whole, working for common goals. The NWCA

functions—as stated modestly in its early membership brochure—“to foster communication among writing centers and to provide a forum for concerns.” The heart of our work in writing centers is service—in its largest sense—and leadership. That ethic applies as well to the National Writing Centers Association.

One final metaphor for the National Writing Centers Association appeals to me personally and reinforces O’Neill’s notion of the importance of the past. Early in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, a character reminisces about what it is like to live as an adult in the house where she spent her childhood. One of the characteristics about the house that is most vivid in her memory is the walnut dining room table where fresh flowers sat. Each day the flowers were changed, their aroma filling the air. No longer are flowers on the table. All that is left is a watermark, a ring where the vase sat, yet this watermark is a “mooring” for the character, an image that conjures up the look and the smell of the flowers even though they are no longer there. My professional mooring continues to be the NWCA, the writing center, and those who populate that world. In spite of its relatively young age, the NWCA is a stable mooring, a place to anchor. For that, I am grateful to have been there—as many others were—at its inception, to be part of an exciting and energizing history.

Notes

¹This article is a revision of the keynote address delivered at the First National Writing Centers Conference in New Orleans on April 13, 1994.

²Awards are listed in *The Writing Center Journal*. Muriel Harris received the first service award in 1984, Stephen North and Thomas J. Reigstad and Donald A. McAndrew the first research awards in 1985, and Evelyn J. Posey the first graduate student award in 1986.

³By March 1985, *Assembly* was replaced by *Association*, and the official title became the “National Writing Centers Association: An NCTE Assembly,” a designation that still appears on its publications.

⁴Written by Jeanne Simpson, the statement appeared in the 5.2/6.1 (1985) issue of *The Writing Center Journal*.

⁵A recent NCTE publication by Tom Flynn and Mary King brings together the best presentations from the ECWCA’s first ten years.

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