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## Letters (1)

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## Letters

### *“Early Writing Centers: Toward a History”*

My initial response to Peter Carino’s article is, it’s about time.

This is not a letter to the editor in the traditional refutational style of this genre. Rather, it is a letter of support for the work that Peter has done and a letter of encouragement to those who would consider extending what he has begun. There is room for much more. In this letter, I would like to consider briefly why I think Peter’s article is important and what the implications are.

As Peter points out, the phenomenon of the writing center is considered a relatively recent one in the American educational system, and the current literature on writing centers supports this perception. However, as Anne Ruggles Gere demonstrates so well in her book *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, much of what practitioners consider to be “new” really is not new at all. Gere asks her readers to reconceptualize the history of their own pedagogical practices by pointing out that the continual re-discovery of writing groups serves an important function. Gere maintains that writing groups (like writing centers) “have remained on the edges of educational consciousness,” a crucial location, according to Gere, since “strength lies in that marginality because the periphery has the potential to renew whatever constitutes itself as the center” (52).

The temptation to portray the writing center as a new idea is great when trying to secure funding or when trying to convince students that tutoring is not simply a euphemism for remediation. The danger of this approach, however, lies in failing to acknowledge the cultural and historical forces which have brought writing centers, if not to the center, at least to the margins of discussions on critical pedagogy and educational theory.

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This view of writing centers as radical pedagogical spaces is one that is of particular interest to me, and it is an area that Peter only alludes to in his article. The early literature confirms the general wisdom that writing centers are not, indeed have never been, monolithic, that they have always been as diverse as the institutions in which they are housed and the eras in which they exist. This the literature illustrates quite clearly, demonstrating that writing centers have consistently been subject to the politics of their days, whether those politics be related to the impact of World War II—and the attendant implications of educating citizens for full participation in a democracy—or the Civil Rights Movement, open admissions, and the subsequent public outcry of a literacy crisis.

Writing centers, as far back as we can tell, have been expected to perform a regularizing discursive function, and, as Peter's article shows, writing centers have always rejected, at one point or another, in one way or another, that role. They have sought instead to carve out spaces for students, subverting the hegemony of the academy and undertaking the difficult task of critiquing the very factors giving rise to their existence.

Like Peter, I do not want to romanticize the early histories. These labs and clinics had their problems, and Peter outlines them well. But what our centers of today have in common with the labs and clinics of earlier eras is not so much the method; what we have most in common is a history which has been consistently and thoroughly political. Whether this mission involves working with veterans seeking a college education made available to them thanks to the GI bill or facing a "literacy crisis" brought on by the open admissions students entering college in the early 70s makes little difference. This is, in my mind, a legacy of which we can be very proud, a badge of courage that not many in our institutions can wear.

Beth Boquet  
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