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The Writing Center as "Purified Space": Competing Discourses and the Dangers of Definition

Angela Petit

Theorists such as Lisa Ede, Lex Runciman, Peter Carino, and Thomas Hemmeter all identify definition as an issue critically important to the writing center community. Ede and Runciman assert that current definitions inadequately describe what happens in centers and invite us to redefine our positions within centers and the academy as a whole. Addressing such redefinitions, Carino states, "In one sense, this is how it should be. . . . [D]efinition is always already tenuous, for to define is to symbolize, to create metaphors, to be in language" ("What Do" 31). Although Carino commends these re-creations, he nevertheless warns that "we must maintain critical consciousness about ourselves" (39), an idea shared by Hemmeter, who likewise remarks that we "need to become more self-conscious of how we talk to ourselves" (44). Examining the act of definition itself, both Hemmeter and Carino investigate the impact current definitions have on writing centers, and suggest that only through continual self-reflection will we understand how these definitions influence our theorizing about writing centers and our activities within centers.

Given this call to reflect critically, I will address one act of definition prevalent in writing center scholarship, a strategy that divides centers into rigid ideological categories with specific, often metaphorical names as well as distinct activities, theoretical foundations, and sense of place within academic institutions. I will argue that situating writing centers within these separable categories brings with it the danger that we will perceive centers as, to borrow Min-zhan Lu's words, "purified space[s] where only one discourse [is] spoken and heard" ("Silence" 445). To envision writing centers as

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purified spaces not only misrepresents the way that discourses actually operate in centers but may also negatively impact many areas of writing center practice, particularly tutor training.

Within the scholarship, definitions of centers vary, as do the activities those definitions signify, but a general pattern emerges that should be quite familiar to writing center readers. More specifically, theorists commonly set up a binary opposition between an older type of center, usually tagged as a “current-traditional” lab or clinic, and a center or centers guided less by a text- or skills-based approach and more by personal contact between writer and tutor. In the current-traditional center (called a “conservative” center by Christina Murphy and a Storehouse by Andrea Lunsford), the tutor’s discourse mimics that of a teacher or editor and, in Murphy’s words, focuses primarily on “a student’s mastery of skills—specifically, grammar, mechanics, vocabulary, and sentence complexity and variety” (118). Thus, the tutor voices an institutional authority policing the rules of correct academic usage. Whether or not current-traditional centers as they are rigidly defined in the scholarship exist, or ever existed, is open to debate (Carino, “Early”). What is important here is that the current-traditional center, as a construct circulating in writing center discourse, serves as the community’s shared dystopia, Mary Louise Pratt’s term for a “claustrophobic and degraded” discursive space (58)—in this case, a dark place whose impermeable borders embody the negative aspects of tutoring through authoritarian worksheets, grammar exercises, red pens, and computer drill-and-kill stations.

A number of alternatives to the current-traditional model have been proposed. Very often, a theorist will define this type of center through its underlying ideology or epistemology, whether that foundation be the liberatory theories of Tilly and John Warnock, the romantic expressionism that Alice Gillam critiques, or the social constructionist theories proposed by Ede. Shaped by these ideologies, the centers may be identified through metaphors such as Lunsford’s Garret and Burkean Parlor or adjectives as diverse as liberal, liberatory, expressionist, romantic, social constructionist, collaborative, and radical. What binds such varied descriptions together is their representation as alternatives to a polarized other: the current-traditional model. In terms of discourse, these various renderings of the writing center have generated useful and innovative tutoring practices. Nevertheless, particularly when the centers are defined in relation to their binary opposite, these discourses stand in such sharp relief to current-traditional discourse that they emerge as the stable and homogeneous language of purified spaces.¹

A number of theorists have already cautioned that these purified discursive areas cannot adequately represent writing center activity. Carino points out that although he places the “defining metaphors” of centers along a historical continuum, this history does not necessarily hold: “Put concretely, for a writing center at one school it may be 1991; for a center at another it

may be 1970" ("What" 40). Moreover, in their tutoring sourcebook, Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood clearly tell tutors that in spite of specific classifications of writing instruction, "tutorials are rarely, if ever, exclusively the product of any one paradigm. Instead, they are often a creative, and highly individual, mix of each approach" (4). Similarly, in his discussion of the field's search for a "true" epistemological home, Eric Hobson contends that no single ideology can encompass everything that happens within a given center or "take into account all of the forces that impact writing center instruction" ("Maintaining" 71). Elsewhere, Hobson links this search for a true home to one of writing center scholarship's great debates: the relationship between theory and practice. Addressing seeming inconsistencies between rigidly defined theoretical paradigms and resistantly chaotic day-to-day activities, Hobson wryly remarks that "[t]wenty years of trying to produce such a metatheory . . . have not brought us any nearer to the consistency which disciplinary thought makes us desire" ("Writing Center Practice" 8).

And yet, the borders persist. Ironically, Murphy and Sherwood's important statement comes at the end of an extended description of current-traditional, expressionist, and social constructionist paradigms of writing instruction. Carino's qualifier appears at the end of his own historically situated discussion of three types of writing facility: clinic, lab, and center. Even Hobson, to critique the categories he identifies, must acknowledge their existence and hence their hold over the language of writing center scholarship. Classifying writing centers has become so much a part of the discourse that the definitions seem less a discursive tool to help us understand how centers function than a pre-existing fact, one that we are bound to acknowledge and that determines, even inhibits, how we talk about centers.

In critiquing these definitions, I am not suggesting that theorists abandon all attempts to define centers, nor will I argue that historical shifts in writing instruction have had no influence on how writing centers have evolved over the past few decades. However, while these categories allow us to conceptualize what we do, with definition comes the risk of overdefinition and loss of the indeterminacy or "human noise" that Carino calls "a vital sign of life" in writing center discourse and practice. Carino finds this uncertainty not "depressing but invigorating, for the notion of definition . . . smacks of closure, of completion, of death" ("What" 40). Commenting on this indeterminacy, Dave Healy adds: "Metaphor making proliferates in conditions of indeterminacy. . . . Writing centers, because of their historically indeterminate status in the academy, have prompted a good deal of metaphor making" (12). I find Healy's comments especially ironic. The writing center's position as a site of struggle within academic institutions could afford theorists an opportunity to explore that indeterminacy in relation to the always tenuous definitions that we use to describe our work. And yet, we

seem uncomfortable with this lack of closure and, collapsing our metaphor making into quests for idealized definitions of purified space, forestall potentially productive areas of research.

Our generative indeterminacy disappears, and each type of center arrives complete with its own discourse, a stable and pre-packaged language to be used solely within that space. Within writing center scholarship, the discourses presented to tutors seem as impermeable as the walls of the center itself. Presumably, with “proper” training a tutor stepping into a center should be able to switch on the voice appropriate to that center while switching off any “foreign” discourses from the “outside” world. But discourses cannot be kept in separate boxes and taken out individually to suit the occasion. In a writing center, tutors encounter not just one discourse but many, all operating simultaneously within that space. Tutors quickly realize that the discourses present within centers inevitably blend, overlap, and, as Lu states, struggle “to dominate the discussion, constantly incorporating, dismissing, or suppressing the arguments of each other” (“Silence” 444). Theorists such as Lu and Pratt warn that those who ignore this competition, who mistakenly view discourse as rigid and impermeable, pay a price. Pratt states that within the closed space where one discourse supposedly operates, “Disorders . . . are almost automatically seen as failures or breakdowns not to be accounted for within the system” (51). According to Lu, the price of such “failure” is silence: a speaker or writer who is taught to expect and use a single discourse within a given purified space and to treat “outside” voices as disorders will inevitably face frustration, even total silence, when she discovers those disorders struggling to be heard. Overdefining writing centers intensifies even as it conceals this competition among discourses, making the tutor’s task of negotiating conflicting voices unnecessarily difficult.

I first noticed this struggle during my earliest semesters as a writing center director, when I trained the tutors (and myself) exclusively in a peer approach that defined itself against the current-traditional model. The tutors and I explicitly informed writers and administrators alike that we were not an editing service or skills center. Situating ourselves within a collaborative approach similar to that theorized by Kenneth Bruffee, we emphasized continual conversation between writer and tutor, who became, in Bruffee’s words, co-learners or knowledgeable peers engaging in conversations in which knowledge was not an object transferred from tutor to writer, but something “generate[d] and maintain[ed] in company with and in dependency upon each other” (“Peer Tutoring” 11).² Although a Bruffian approach does not preclude discussions of specific textual features such as style, grammar, and mechanics, we cautiously shaped our tutoring discourse to avoid direct comments concerning student writing that would co-opt students’ authority over the text. The tutors liked this focus on conversation

rather than mandate, on the sense of camaraderie developed between writer and collaborative tutor, and preferred to talk to writers about writing rather than serve as institutionally sanctioned, text-based grammar specialists.

Nevertheless, the tutors became uncomfortable when they began to notice in their own voices the supposedly foreign tones of the current-traditional tutor "intruding" on their sessions. I heard this discomfort in different tutors' comments throughout those early semesters:

It's so hard for me to resist picking up the pencil and just saying, move over, let me do it.

I don't see how we can ignore grammar when it's what most people come here for.

Who are we responsible to? Are we part of the English Department, or do we help *this* writer, regardless of what the department wants?

Trained to work as co-learners and not as teachers or editors, the tutors reacted with frustration as they realized that the voices of the current-traditional and collaborative tutors could not be separated. Their frustration is understandable. During orientation sessions, I had presented both our collaborative center and the current-traditional center as well-defined spaces, and, in keeping with so much of writing center scholarship, the latter center emerged clearly as our dystopia. In contrast, I had presented collaborative tutoring as the sole discourse of our center, thereby constructing, to borrow another of Pratt's metaphors, a utopia—a homogeneous and fixed discursive island in which instances of dystopic current-traditional discourse were seen as "disorders" or "breakdowns." Because the collaborative model was the center's exclusive approach, its designated discourse, the tutors believed that they were *either* co-learners *or* current-traditional tutors. Failure to juggle these mutually exclusive voices was perceived as failure in the game, as an infraction against the rules of collaborative tutoring.³

Pratt points out that utopias and dystopias attempt to smooth over these failures and breakdowns by externalizing them as mere outside interruptions and constructing conflict-free sites where "it is assumed that all participants are engaged in the same game and that the game is the same for all players"; within such a space, conflict cannot exist because "only *legitimate* moves are named in the system" (51). However, as both she and Lu suggest, these purified facades cannot hold and, never fully hiding conflict, ultimately generate more. Working in our own rigidly defined collaborative space, the tutors and I encountered such conflict when Park, a Korean graduate student, came to the center for help with grammar. After one session with Park, an angry, and honest, tutor named David wrote in his journal:

I had my first experience today which was unpleasant. . . . It was with Park. I helped him yesterday with a paper on policy. He brought

it in—all sixteen pages of it—and wanted to work on it *word by word*. This seems like an unrealistic use of the writing room to me. . . . [H]e just wanted me to tell him what to do. . . . But here’s the kicker: today he came in with the same sixteen-page paper . . . and he had Beth go over the same beginning section that I went over with him yesterday! . . . I felt insulted: Park doesn’t respect my skill as a reader. I told Beth that if we are in the same room at the same time . . . I would like her to work with him.

In my understanding of the sessions between David and Park, David’s anger to a certain extent hinged on collaborative tutoring’s assumptions about the proper role of a writing center. Trained as a co-learner, David resented being used as the editor of sixteen pages of text or being positioned as a teacher who merely tells the writer “what to do.” Within the context of collaborative tutoring, Park’s use of the writing center as an editing or teaching service was indeed unrealistic: it did not fit a utopian vision of the collaborative center as a place from which current-traditional discourse had been banished.

The above reading becomes problematic if we acknowledge that collaborative tutoring is not actually a utopian enterprise. However defined or classified, discourses exist side by side within centers and continually challenge tutors to privilege one voice over another. Given this competition, my question then becomes: Did David’s anger stem not just from his assumptions about collaborative tutoring, but also from a belief (one we had defined as current-traditional) that a tutor’s skill and level of respect relate directly to status as an authority on texts—in other words, as a teacher or editor?

This possibility brings to mind John Trimbur’s argument that “peer” (a term Trimbur links to Bruffee’s “co-learner”) and “tutor” may actually be a contradiction in terms and that titles like peer or co-learner mask the academic hierarchy and institutional pressures always weighing on tutors.⁴ Asserting that David’s competence depends on his ability to “fix” Park’s text, this hierarchy is, according to Trimbur, “part of the old script,” one in which teachers and tutors effectively wield institutional authority by “passing down knowledge” (27). David’s training in a utopian collaborative approach told him that this script typified a current-traditional model aligned with institutional demands that writing centers protect the rules of standard English. Therefore, as a co-learner participating in a conversation about writing, he was to avoid such uses of the writing center.

This is easier said than done. As Trimbur notes, the old script competes with the new, and tutors cannot simply swap one identity as members of an academic hierarchy for another that defines them as peers or co-learners. Thus, perhaps David felt not only used by Park but also insulted that he would turn to another authority, Beth, to check the previous day’s work. Within the context of collaborative tutoring, David knew that he was not

responsible for editing a certain number of pages per day, but this belief had to compete with a voice, presumably banned from our center, demanding that David serve as an authority on Park's text. Lu posits that the tension between competing discourses eventually silences those unprepared to manage the conflict. Thus, it is interesting to note that while David voices his concerns strongly in his journal, at the end of his entry he falls silent and refuses to work with Park again.

How do we move beyond these silences? To begin with, a heightened awareness of the ways that definition both enables and limits our understanding of writing centers would cause theorists to see more clearly the risks embedded in overdefining centers. Still, this awareness would not eliminate conflict among writing center discourses—nor should it. Regardless of the definitions assigned to centers and discourses, tutors will continually face the choice of speaking as a co-learner, a liberator, a teacher, an editor, and so on. The answer lies in how we train tutors—and ourselves—to manage that competition. Lu and Pratt point to an answer, a way of managing the competition, that views conflict as itself productive. Lu contends that the way to move beyond the silences and the sense of failure is not to resolve but to foreground the “dissonance,” to teach others to “reposition” themselves “in relation not to a single, monolithic discourse but to a range of competing discourses” (“Writing” 18-19). According to Lu, those in composition must teach that conflict is not a sign of failure; instead, it is an opportunity to negotiate and mediate competing voices, to find meaning and shape identity by learning to speak not within but among discourses.

Writing center scholarship is already moving toward this answer. Tackling the contradictions between the terms peer and tutor, Trimbur echoes Lu when he first states that “[r]his crisis . . . is a potentially fruitful one for students” (24), and later notes that tutors cannot shift their roles or discourses but often serve as “peers and tutors simultaneously” (25). Trimbur, however, stops short of embracing conflict as meaningful in itself and aims to resolve the competition among tutoring discourses: “What I have in mind is a sequence of tutor training that treats tutors differently depending on their tutoring experience—in short, that treats tutors developmentally” (26). Trimbur's article implies that, at some point, an individual can cease to be both peer and tutor simultaneously. His (re)olution creates another collaborative tutoring utopia by suggesting that it is possible to avoid the training of tutors as institutionally sanctioned “little teachers” and to focus almost exclusively on gradually training tutors to be peers or co-learners.

Trimbur's ideas, I think, can be taken a little further, more toward Lu and Pratt's theory that conflict is itself valuable and not something to be resolved. Directors can help tutors understand that when competing discourses struggle to dominate a session, they have not failed as a tutor, nor has their tutoring identity been polluted by outside voices. Thus, a director

would not encourage a tutor like David to overcome his frustration and silence by ignoring the notion that his worth as a tutor depends on his ability to act as a teacher or editor. Instead, David would bring that belief—as well as his other assumptions about tutoring—out into the open. Situating himself not within but among his many discourses, he could then negotiate or mediate the conflict among those voices and see that he is not exclusively a co-learner or a current-traditional tutor, but a tutor whose identity is formed through, not beyond, the tension and struggle of competing discourses.

Here, Pratt's ideas on the relationship between discourse and institutional power might also help David. According to Pratt, utopias inaccurately present their discourses as egalitarian, with linguistic "rules shared among equal players" (51). Highlighting the actual conflicts and social differentiations of discourse allows speakers and writers to see that the discursive playing field is never equal. With this in mind, David could discern the webs of institutional pressures and hierarchies, no longer falsely banished as relics of current-traditional tutoring, that actually surround tutors and writers seeking to work as co-learners. Pratt's and Lu's theories would not teach David to eliminate conflict (or merely sidestep institutional power by constructing a utopian collaborative space within the writing center) but to be prepared for this conflict. He could learn to negotiate academic structures demanding that he serve as a textual authority, but through mediation of his competing discourses and not through resolution.

Finally, how might a session built on negotiation rather than resolution play itself out? Let me close with another example. In addition to meeting with David, Park also met frequently with a tutor named Marie. True to her training, Marie from the start relied on the discourse of collaborative tutoring, asking questions rather than serving as teacher or editor and simply telling Park what to change and how to change it. She quickly became frustrated as she realized, with Judith Powers, that while collaborative techniques may work quite well with native-speaking writers, these approaches often fail with second-language writers (40). Placing herself in Park's shoes, Marie wrote in her journal that semester:

I picture myself asking over and over again "How do I say this?" I read a line and try to explain . . . what I'm trying to say. I do not want my tutor to ask, "Well, what's another way you could say blah, blah, blah?" I don't know any other way and, apparently, I didn't know *any* correct way or I wouldn't have screwed it up to begin with.

Trained exclusively in our well-defined collaborative approach, Marie was caught. She knew that the discourse defined as appropriate for the center was simply not working but also felt guilty about the temptation to stray outside of those bounds and take on an authoritarian voice identified as

current-traditional. Marie negotiated her dilemma in the following way:

When [Park] writes a sentence like "The cylinder in hand giving glare walked Matthew above night about cat," I can say, O.K., Park, what are you trying to tell me? And we can talk for a bit until I figure it out and I say, O.K.! I've got it! This is what you're trying to say: "Matthew followed the beam of his flashlight as he walked through the darkness and searched for the cat." I then give this sentence to Park. This is wrong? In my opinion, no. This is what he said in my language. . . . I *give* Park *my language*, not my ideas, not my thoughts, but my language.

Marie did not cross an imaginary line and step outside the utopia of collaborative tutoring into current-traditional teaching and editing, nor did she resolve her conflict by constructing yet another purified discourse. Rather, to overcome frustration and possible silence, Marie repositioned herself among the discourses of co-learner, teacher, and editor and adapted a staple of our center's collaborative discourse, the question, to meet the needs of writer and tutor. Like Hemmeter, she knows that the writing center "is a text still in the process of composition" (44) and that this text must be redefined with every session.

Marie ends her entry by stating, "So, I hope my thinking is not wrong here, and, if it is, please let me know." If she had been trained from the start to mediate, to view the pull between writing center discourses as meaningful, she would already have known the answer to her question. But what about the answers that Marie generated on her own? Some might feel uncomfortable with her response to her sessions with Park. The edges are rough; the answers are not "perfect." Nevertheless, her response does demonstrate negotiation as well as reflection, which Jane Peterson identifies as essential to successful teaching. Moreover, perfection—the perfect answer—is static discourse and is, after all, only necessary or possible in those places defined through the metaphor of utopia.

Notes

¹I have purposely avoided repeating the writing center definitions so much a part of the scholarship and therefore probably familiar to most readers. However, readers interested in definitions, redefinitions, and critiques of previous writing center definitions might look at the following selected authors: Carino; Ede; Gillam; Hemmeter; Hobson; Kail and Trimbur; Lunsford; Murphy; Murphy and Sherwood; North; Runciman; Trimbur; Warnock and Warnock.

²Interestingly, although Bruffee's most well-known article, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" theorizes collaborative learning in general, his earlier version, "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" addresses writing centers specifically.

³Pratt observes that utopias are commonly presented through images of "games" and "moves": "Models involving games and moves are often used to describe interaction. These preserve the sense of finite options, the presence of borders, rules shared among equal players" (51).

⁴For a related discussion of tutoring's institutional context, see Kail and Trimbur, "The Politics of Peer Tutoring."

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