Letters

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"Open Admissions and the Construction of Writing Center History: A Tale of Three Models"

In his recent *WCJ* essay, "Open Admissions and the Construction of Writing Center History: A Tale of Three Models," Peter Carino provides us with much to think about as he invites us to consider a more complex but more insightful and more realistic model of writing center history. I found his efforts to "provide a thick description of the multiple forces impacting writing centers" (30) to be particularly useful in helping us see how we've tended to oversimplify readings of our past, thereby limiting our ability to conceptualize what writing centers are and how they develop(ed). Perhaps I can "thicken" his cultural model a bit more by contributing some personal stories. My justification in boring *WCJ* readers with my stories is partly because Pete mentions me in his own "tale"; partly because my stories reflect personal, social, and cultural forces at work that may be familiar to others and that reinforce the accuracy of Pete Carino's cultural model which asks us to consider such factors; and partly because the more stories we collect, the richer the picture of our complex past—and present—will be. I hope my set of stories will serve as an invitation to others to contribute their stories so that we can continue to build the cultural model that Pete shows us we need.

In his essay, Pete Carino managed to unearth and quote a section of a CCCC paper of mine from 1976 in which I blithely described our Writing Lab as tending to "focus on grammar and mechanics." Pete uses his cultural model to seek the "indeterminacy of [my] text" which undermines the often repeated readings of dialectic and evolutionary models of writing centers. He finds contradictions in my description which can't be constructed either as the words of a "heroic subversive" (in the dialectic model) or as an upholder

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of the evolutionary model, and Pete is dead on right. I wasn't manning any barricades or subverting outside imperatives, I wasn't committed to making a grammar repair shop of our Writing Lab, and in fact, I wasn't even "capitulat[ing] to the Department's supplementary vision of the lab" (40), or feeling confined about what I could say in a global forum such as CCCC (41). Now that Pete has held that CCCC paper up to the light for re-examination, I can recognize some of the multiple forces at play that shaped that narrative just as they shaped our Writing Lab—and me. It's a rich interplay of the personal, social, academic, and cultural.

First, the personal narrative. I readily admit that at that period I was even more confused than I am now, stumbling toward an understanding of what writing center theory and pedagogy were all about, and trying to make sense of what was happening in the brief time I had spent in the place we were creating. Any theorizing we tried to do was, at best, attempts to get to the high ground to describe what was working for us. (By the way, that "we" is not the regal "we." The three grad students who worked in the lab in its earliest years and I spent endless hours talking about what we were doing—dissecting the tutorials we had been in, comparing notes, and trying to conceptualize what we were doing and how we could do it better.) As Dave Healy notes, "theoretical justification often comes after a particular practice has proven itself convenient or effective" (14). In our case, it was not "a particular practice," but the whole ball of wax. We weren't able to articulate a grand unified scheme and instead waffled back and forth trying to generalize from a mix of what we thought we should be doing and what we were actually doing. The clues for what we thought we should be doing were rather vague, and here I suspect I'm about to record a similar history for other new directors in new writing centers at a particular period in academic, institutional, and disciplinary history—the mid 1970s, when current-traditional composition was the paradigm of choice and the majority of composition staffs, and staffs of writing centers, were populated by people whose academic studies had been in literature.

Thus, I am not attempting any grand pose of humility as much as recording that at a certain time in our writing center history, many of us plunged in with great enthusiasm, a lot of good will, few guidelines, and almost no preparation. There are now doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition and new PhDs who take on the work of directing centers after actually having worked in a center or written about it or presented papers or even completed dissertations after studying writing centers. Twenty years ago that was an almost unknown situation. And, while less common now, there are still places where people who have no experience with writing centers are being asked to direct them—starting next week. In my case, in the mid-70s, having finished a doctorate in literature (and someone really needs to investigate why so many of us then had come from graduate studies

in the English Renaissance), I was intrigued with the one-to-one teaching environment that intuitively "felt" better when working with writers and that created such a superb learning environment, but an environment for which I had no background to understand or theorize about.

Groping towards conceptualizing what I was doing, I have strong suspicions that I was not alone. I know that when I talked with others in writing centers and shared with them a favorite metaphor of being in a situation in which we were playing a violin while constructing it, I usually met with an almost audible murmuring of "me toos," much like a similar reaction to a statement made by Carl Klaus that swept through a large audience at a CCCC session about that time. Klaus challenged us to face up to what we knew but were afraid to say out loud—though we were intrigued with our new field and well-intentioned, most of us had no academic training for what we were doing and little idea of what in hell we were engaged in. As I looked around that room during the deafening silence that followed Klaus's words, I realized (as others did) that I was not alone. So, just as I had company at that CCCC session, I know I had writing center colleagues who did not take the initial step of either starting or stepping into their center with clearly articulated theories and pedagogies and administrative strategies and tutor-training techniques and carefully worded mission statements.

With this background, I'd like to move back to Pete's quotation from my description of our Writing Lab in 1976 because it illuminates my attempts at that time to describe what our lab was doing. My knowledge of composition theory was limited to what I could glean from the product-based instruction being offered in the current-traditional textbooks being used in my department at that time and from some guesses about what was being stressed in classrooms, though the composition program was large, amorphous, and taught mostly by graduate students in literature and some part-timers. The department gave us no detailed directives or rigorous imperatives about what this new Writing Lab could and couldn't do. Instead, there was supportive recognition that the department needed to have a place for students to get some personal help with their writing. No one specified what that "help" would consist of, however. Instead, they supported us to the extent of giving us some staff (too few), some space (too small), and some S&E money (too little). But we at least got the doors open even as we tried to figure out what we should do with the students once they walked in. Teachers were not exactly clear about our goals and work either. We asked the instructional staff to fill out referral forms, but few ever came back with the students; we asked them to indicate on papers what their students should work on, and most wrote, if they wrote anything, "go to the Writing Lab for help with this paper." In a current-traditional program, with a strong emphasis on product, we assumed that teachers would be monitoring the correctness of their students' surface structures. There was certainly evidence

of that in student papers when the students came in, and we did have students with concerns about all the red marks in the margins of their papers. But in addition, reality kept messing up assumptions that we should be focusing on sentence-level concerns because students walking in the door also kept asking all the questions they still ask: "How should I start this paper?" "Does this fit the assignment?" "I want to be sure this flows. Could you look it over?" And "I can only think of two pages to write but it has to be at least three pages."

Moreover, next door to the Writing Lab was a testing office where all graduate students at our institution had to demonstrate writing proficiency in a written exam scored heavily for grammatical competence. We could look at the scoring sheets being used for that exam and know exactly what those graduate students needed, and they needed it desperately as they couldn't finish advanced degrees until they passed that exam. Some other new directors and tutors in a newly created writing center may have chosen to emphasize subverting an institutional setting with such requirements, but in our case, there was a strong recognition that what we could do for those students was to help them get through that exam. We worked on spelling, sentence-level errors, and the other problems that were causing failing grades. But here, too, the grad students who filtered in to the lab also pressed for help in trying to write that 500-word proficiency essay quickly, how to overcome their inability to come up with topics and content, and so on. So, while we had yet another constituency (these graduate students) who asked for help in understanding the errors marked in exams they had failed, even there, tutorial assistance was not confined to matters of surface error. Moreover, some grad students, having found a place where they could talk about their writing, began to bring in drafts of seminar papers, dissertation prospectuses, and other writing and to talk about all the usual larger issues involved in composing complex pieces of discourse. ESL students were eager to talk to tutors to help improve their English, and they too began appearing in large numbers. And undergraduates who had come for tutorials with composition papers or who had heard about us drifted in with résumés, econ papers, forestry reports, and newsletters for their student organizations. Were all these additional questions and types of writing merely work we did on the side, in addition to helping composition classroom teachers? What was our instructional emphasis and what was our relationship to the student? Peer? Collaborator? We didn't even assign ourselves names and informally adopted what everyone outside the lab called us—Lab instructors. But we knew that assigning papers and exercises was not appropriate (or realistic), and we were finding out how effective collaborative talk can be (the "quick feedback" that Pete notices in my 1976 text). It took us awhile to realize that all of what we were doing was the legitimate work of a writing center. But assumptions and first guesses don't die easily, especially when they have a

grain of truth in them.

Initially, then, we weren't sure how to define our constituency or mission, and while that was a matter that needed to be thought out, it seemed much more urgent to us to think about finding the best pedagogy possible, to help—really help—the writers we were meeting. Only after more reflection on our practice, along with growing understanding of what is involved in collaboration and collaborative learning, could I later articulate more coherent pictures of our relationship to writers and the classroom. With the help of Kenneth Bruffee and others, I was able to move through the stages Bruffee describes from his own experience as

> the insights we garnered through the practical experience of organiz-
> ing peer tutoring to meet student needs. More recently, we have
> begun to learn that much of this practical experience and the insights
> it yielded have a conceptual rationale, a theoretical dimension, that
> had escaped us as we muddled through, trying to solve practical
> problems in practical ways. (4)

This is a process that Dave Healy describes as integral to writing center experience when he notes that "a writing center might develop effective strategies for working with its unique clientele and then later look for ways to account for and support its praxis theoretically" (15).

What I hope is becoming evident from all this localized detail of how some of us pieced together a muddled picture of what we were doing is that the early description of our Writing Lab really does reflect a variety of forces at work. Questions of pedagogical practice, the situating of the writing center in relationship to the teacher, even the ability to encapsulate what the focus of tutorials was or should be were matters we were working on but had not worked out. We were becoming aware of some things that others may already have known—that writers come to writing centers to talk about a wide variety of writing concerns and that the nature of the interaction was very different from that of student and teacher. When we asked a standard tutorial question—"What should we work on today?"—students talked about grammar and mechanics, but they also brought with them a wider range of concerns. Reality kept messing up my expectations, and as my understanding grew, I began to see that what was also being emphasized in our Writing Lab tutorials were all the larger issues that always concern writers. Thus, the "indeterminacy" of my text (as Pete describes it) was not based on being confined by outside strictures. Instead, as I reflect back on it now, I think the indeterminacy reflects my own uncertainty about the accuracy of what I was saying. My generalizations didn't fit, didn't ad-equately encompass all of what we were doing. I wonder how many others in writing centers that were started during the sway of current-traditional rhetoric assumed that surface error should predominate in tutorials? Did we

begin to articulate the "dialectic" model as we gained a better sense of what we were doing? But how accurate was that? Did we begin to use the terms of newer paradigms as they became current in composition conversation? Or is all of this true because in different centers, in different settings, different forces prevailed to different degrees? If so, then Pete's cultural model is incredibly rich and reinforces what Dave Healy has already told us: "most discussions of writing centers eventually descend to the particular—or at least they should" (13).

There's an interesting corollary here. If there is any truth to the historical circumstances I've described here, that some writing centers are started with less than clearly articulated theories about what we're doing, then that might help us understand that a recurring problem—the view of the writing center as a fix-it station—is not going to disappear any time soon. Writing centers are still being started by people who have not delved deeply into the literature of writing centers, though now we have an abundant wealth of such literature, a luxury many new writing center directors did not have years ago. In the cases where the initial sense of what might happen in the newly created writing center tended to lean toward grammar instruction, such people were/ are doing no more than others outside of composition (or, as Steve North reminds us, even our colleagues in our own departments) think teaching writing is all about. I somehow doubt that I'm alone in continuing to meet up with colleagues in other departments (and in my own) who assume that those of us who teach writing focus our lives on getting "them" to write correct sentences. Let me add one more possibility to consider. Maybe the battle to be understood, to have our colleagues understand what goes on inside the center, is a never-ending one. As long as there are people who continue to reduce the incredibly complex act of helping writers become more proficient to getting them to write correct sentences, composition programs will be looked down upon and not well understood. And as long as there are people who continue to reduce the incredibly complex act of conferencing with a student in the one-to-one, individualized, non-evalua-tive setting of a writing center tutorial to mending broken sentences, there will be teachers who send students to clean up their papers. And if there are teachers who can't see that tutorial instruction is more than that, why should we expect that some students entering the university aren't just as unable to conceptualize what a writing center is and wander in, hoping someone will tell them how to fix the paper. Even in my tutor training classes for peer tutors, we always start each semester with some tutors-to-be thinking that their job is to tell the student what's wrong with the paper and to fix the errors. Maybe there will always be those who view writing instruction as limited to error hunting, and maybe some will assume that instruction in grammatical competence can happen in one site while "writing instruction" can proceed in another.

The evolution isn't over and won't be over, and evolutionary models, though they help us capture some aspects of the personal and disciplinary growth we experience, also don't seem to account for the variety of local situations that impinge on each individual writing center, and they don't account for the perpetual misunderstandings that occur and will continue to occur. The dialectic model doesn't entirely work either. Although it provides the insights Pete has so carefully sketched out for us, it also assumes that new directors march in, from the very beginning, with a clear, coherent plan for a process-oriented center, a clearly conceptualized understanding of collaboration, and well-articulated theoretical bases for every decision. Pete Carino's cultural model permits us to look more closely, to acknowledge multiple truths as well as to see some of the complexities we deal with. It also opens the door to listening to more of our stories and learning from them, to enrich even further the incredibly rich world we inhabit.

Muriel Harris
Purdue University

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