Moveable Feasts, Liminal Spaces: 
Writing Centers and the State 
of In-Betweenness

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In “a letter to a friend,” the opening lines of A Moveable Feast, Ernest Hemingway writes, “If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast” (title page). I like to think of a writing center as a moveable feast on a transient table—sweets and savories, an interesting mix of guests, perhaps unmatched place settings. An invisible table gathering ghosts of conversations, echoes of drafts, and old assignments. Writing centers lurk in a state of in-betweenness like Hemingway’s haunts in Paris. Writing centers house teachers who are students, writers who are readers, people who speak their written texts. Writing centers exist in an often uncertain present—but they work with a past brought in by writers thinking about a future. For years, writing center staffs have tried to define our place to ourselves, our administrators, and to our profession. We’ve attempted to create a definition that reflects our realities—our struggles as well as our successes—what we’ve been and what we may yet become. But definition eludes us.

Writing center director/scholars, since we first had a forum in which to write, have considered this situation. Muriel Harris, looking over our recent history, writes of our “frill” status. Even the most successful writing centers, she notes, “may still have to contend with a diminishing minority who view them as unnecessary frills, sucking up

1 This article draws from a keynote speech I presented at the New England Writing Centers Association conference titled “The Writing Center as a Movable Feast,” March 1995 in Nashua, NH. Since then, with informed minds, critical eyes, and tutoring strategies, Mike Evces, Julie Cheville, Joan Mullin, and Al DeCiccio helped me design and draft appropriate revisions.

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funds, space, and personnel to duplicate what goes on in the classroom or to coddle remedial students who shouldn't have been admitted in the first place” (“Talking in the Middle” 40). Mary Trachsel writes about our feminized status: “Teaching . . . and especially the teaching of the individualized sort that goes on in many writing centers, is a relatively contained academic activity. In contrast to scholarship, such teaching has the flavor of domesticity, and like the quintessentially domestic, caregiving work of mothering, it is often carried out at a considerable remove from the academy’s systems of economic rewards and political privileges” (33). In both his 1984 and 1994 articles, Stephen North cautions writing center staffs against thoughts of “institutional martyrdom,” (“Idea . . . Revisited” 18) as we often see ourselves working under conditions of “professional liability” in an “obscure backwater” (“Idea” 444). And so we, our colleagues, and our own literature have supported ourselves in our complaints for as long as we’ve had conversations about our situation. But it’s time we re-examine what we mean to do with this concept of marginality. Joan Mullin writes:

For once and for all I’d like to erase the image of marginality that lurks in writing centers’ past—and which still exists in some of our presents. Similar to a language termed “woundology” (Carolyn Myss, Anatomy of the Spirit), the term allows us to continue mourning over our position, our loss of voice, our loss of budget from a disadvantageous academic space. The term irritates with parasitic consistency causing us to wallow in or challenge its usefulness. Such history and the mentality it breeds deserves to be reinvented, for our “marginality” has not led to our failed budgets or support, nor has it contributed to our successes. We have always been “of” our institutions; we have always been within them. (Personal communication)

In the following pages, I’d like to explore a possible re-invention for our own history and mentality with the help of some concepts from anthropology. It’s not so much marginalization, perhaps, that we’ve been responding to all these years. It might be a position far more powerful than marginal. Maybe if we look at the terms “culture” and “liminality,” we’ll have some clues about why we’ve set up—and committed to working in—the places that are our writing centers.

A writing center cannot define itself as a space—we’re often kicked out of our spaces. It’s not a pedagogy. We’re always re-articulating our pedagogy. It’s certainly not an academic department. It crosses all disciplines. A writing center does not produce a text—the texts in writing centers are unfinished. And we don’t own the texts our students create;
those texts are cross-curricular, cross-linguistic, cross-discursive. And we can’t really call a writing center a culture; it exists where differing cultures meet. Non-traditional students, failed students, needy faculty, lost students, LD and ESL students, gifted and average students, blocked and oppressed students—and we hope other “kinds” of students and faculty—pour in our doors daily. We allow our centers to mold themselves to our institutions’ needs. And that too presents a problem because when we must define ourselves to our colleagues in more academic, “fixed” places of our institutions, we know we’re not telling the whole story—and they’re not hearing it.

Writing centers are the trunks of part-time adjuncts’ cars, loaded with papers and books and files full of records. Writing centers are spaces inside other spaces: corners of classrooms, glassed-in sections of libraries, rooms or stairwells available semester-by-semester. Writing centers exist in cyberspace—between correspondents, between readers and writers, quite literally between the lines. Writing centers are conferences in offices and dorm rooms and under trees. Writing centers defy spatial definition. And that bothers us because it conflicts with conventional private office spaces in traditional institutions.

The texts we create in writing centers defy completion. We want our students to understand that texts are mutable, mutual, revisable constructions—formed somehow between tutors, students, professors, assignments, textbooks, requirements. They belong to one person, but they belong to all that surrounds that person. We are often accused of doing our students’ work for them, of stepping around plagiarism boundaries—and those same accusers beg us to continue the work. Writing centers defy textual definition. And that bothers us because our traditional academic communities demand fixed texts.

For years, as a writing center director at a small college, I used the term “culture” to describe what we were. I wanted us to stay in a separate place but I didn’t know why. Our writing center was a culture, I reasoned, not a building or a department. It echoed who we were as a staff—part-timers, adjuncts, people who emerged sometimes only in the evening. Separate. We weren’t quite insiders, but we functioned to keep all the insiders inside. In our writing center we had a way of “doing” words that wasn’t much like school. And that made us, as well as our colleagues, uncomfortable.

The college granted us space between its building plans. Each time we moved, as we created our own records and schedules to meet the college’s, we were more sure to re-define ourselves to ourselves. We lost and gained buildings and rooms, but we kept pencils, we kept packages of paper, we kept a growing library, too, and the students kept coming. Students remarked that the writing center smelled more like home than
school. Our oak table, carpets and stuffed chairs, our coffee pot and potted plants were our stable spatial constants. As we moved, we grew to know ourselves, and the college grew to notice our presence.

I'm not embarrassed that I used the term "writing center culture" to describe what we'd created. But I've come to see an interesting opposition. A writing center is not a single space, an ideal product, or a shared pedagogical philosophy. Those are what we might call the features of a culture. Instead, it might be the absence of a culture that makes a writing center what it is: a temporary reflecting place, a movable spot, like Hemingway's café in Paris:

It was a pleasant café, warm and clean and friendly, and I hung up my old waterproof on the coat rack to dry and put my worn and weathered felt hat on the rack above the bench and ordered a café au lait. The waiter brought it and I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and a pencil and started to write. I was writing about up in Michigan and since it was a wild, cold, blowing day it was that sort of day in the story. I had already seen the end of Fall come through boyhood, youth and young manhood, and in one place you could write about it better than in another. That was called transplanting yourself, I thought, and it could be necessary with people as with other growing things. (5)

A writing center, like Hemingway's café, is a place to transplant yourself and your words: a soft and mutable contact zone, a moveable feast. In the next few pages, I want to examine the term "culture," and try to define what I mean when I say it might well be more absent in a writing center than present. As a result of that absence, we might well realize that writing centers have represented changes in higher education long before higher education knew consciously that it needed change.

**Culture Defined**

Anthropologists have contrasting definitions of what culture is—they can be both structured (patterns of belief and behavior as well as untidy deviations from those patterns) and metaphorical ("webs" and "lenses") (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater). Ward Goodenough emphasizes patterns of belief in his definition: "A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members . . . it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of those things . . ." (167). While Goodenough emphasizes organized, clean patterns, Barbara Myerhoff highlights the messiness of culture: "Cultures are, after all, collective, untidy assemblages, authenticated by belief and agreement,
focused only in crisis, systematized after the fact” (10). Clifford Geertz uses Max Weber’s metaphor of a web to describe how a culture hangs together invisibly: “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs...” (5). James Peacock’s metaphor draws from photography, using the lens of a camera, both its “harsh light” and “soft focus” to show how anthropologists try to capture both the background and the foreground of a group (xi).

As teachers of writing and reading, we’ve tried to define culture too. My fellow writing center tutor Judith Stanford defines it as “the ideas, customs, values, skills, and arts of a specific group of people. Most of us belong not to one culture group but to several” (5). In our recent book, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and I define culture as “an invisible web of behaviors, patterns, and rules of a group of people who have contact with one another and share common languages” (2-3).

Although our definitions share a lot with anthropologists, writing centers pay particular attention to the way people take in and give off words. We share beliefs, customs, values—we acknowledge patterns and rules and common language. But we also recognize disruption: we delight in the differences that meet at our tables. We help our students learn about the community of the college and the patterns appropriate for academic literacy—but we want them not to give themselves away to it. We strive to create a temporary space—not exactly home, not exactly school—that offers a momentary respite away from the competing cultures to which our students and colleagues belong.

Writing Center Culture

Writing centers are, I believe, filled with mixed cultural patterns and human insights that are not characteristic of the culture of “higher education.” To illustrate, I’d like to offer a survey of images, cultural moments I’ve snipped from the last fifteen years of writing center history.

Cincinnati, Ohio: A group of high school kids, future tutors in shorts and tank tops, under the trees, sweat together and write together at a high school “writing center camp” for tutors. Funding came from the same source as that for cheerleading and football camps.

Andover, MA: A mix of high school teachers from the USA and from as far away as South Africa, writing tutors from Merrimack College, writing leaders from Phillips Academy (Andover), and 6th to 8th grade students from economically ravaged Lawrence, MA, celebrate the writing of Carlos. Once labelled a behavioral
problem and deficient in many primary skills, Carlos has collaborated with the tutors and teachers and leaders to proclaim at a public reading: "I feel a power coming all over me with words!"

_San Diego, CA:_ Working adults drive over speedbumps, slog out of their cars, scrape their tired feet across the dark parking lot under the buzzing night glare of high school lights, click through the empty polished hallways, and come to life as they write business letters, children’s books, proposals, fiction, and poetry into the night—at the school to which they pay their taxes.

_Nashua, NH:_ Freshmen in a college dorm, covered in piles of crumpled notebook paper, bent coke cans, chewed pencils, share ideas in nightclothes and sweats with an adjunct faculty professor in a “pajama tutoring” session following her night class.

_Detroit, MI:_ A telephone rings—the grammar hot line. One more semi-colon problem bites the dust. In the meantime, the tutor at the other end asks the writer to read the piece around the semi-colon, and the writer re-focuses the theme of her paper. The tutor never knows the writer’s name.

_Merrimack, NH:_ An English teacher and an environmental science teacher collaborate on a writing-about-science course. Students keep scientific journals, monitoring the life shifts on a little one-foot square spot of land each has chosen in the woods behind the school. Each student and teacher has a spot, each has a journal, each researches what she sees, each writes poetry, each has the others. Together, they produce elaborate scientific papers and a book of poetry. The English teacher has never before done a scientific observation, and the science teacher has never written a poem. Most of the ninth graders have done neither.

_Chicago, IL:_ A writing festival in a volatile section of the inner city—run by a local community college and a large city high school: it’s not a contest, but a celebration of writing, with an afternoon of readings—poetry, plays, and essays. Everyone wins a prize and a certificate. A local radio station covers the festival, and the following year it is funded by a local business.
**Monmouth, NJ:** A college writing center director and a high school writing center director write a six-school grant proposal "more complicated than Eisenhower's plans for the invasion of Normandy" for bringing tutors together from high schools and colleges. They give up, instead organize a four day collaborative tutor training program, bringing the high school students to the college writing center. The following year, a second school joins. By the fourth year, they add an all-day tutoring conference with speakers and presentations from both groups. (Farrell 133)

In each of these cultural moments, people are learning and teaching the business of words. Culture, of course, exists among these people—invisible webs of behaviors, shared beliefs, developing patterns and languages. But there is also the absence of a culture. Each moment illustrates a kind of aberration—an in-betweenness of literacy—high school kids at college, adults in a high school at night, a professor conferring with college writers in a dorm lounge, high school writers at camp, a science teacher writing poetry and an English teacher writing a scientific report, linguistically challenged kids celebrating language on a city radio station. It's a thick organic stew of cultures and the absence of a cultural system. In my opinion, this is the educational contribution of which writing centers can be the most triumphant. It presages many programs just finding their ways into our institutions today.

Like the conference in Monmouth, NJ, our professional conferences also offer us such cultural moments. Writing center conferences, national and local, look different from other conferences. High school people and college people talk with each other. Many of us have personal teaching histories which include both high school and college teaching. No one knows who's a tenure-track professor or who's a part-time adjunct, who has a Ph.D. or who doesn't. And no one much cares. Within these conferences over our first ten years, we tried to design a collective concept of writing centers with attention to the institutional differences between high schools and colleges. We elected two NWCA vice-presidents, hoping to span constituencies, solicited high school and college people on our executive boards and journals. We faced articulation head-on with sessions at national conferences. What I hadn't thought about during all this time was that writing centers existed outside of commonly defined cultures—that their value was precisely this liminality, this in-betweenness.
Liminality Defined

In writing center work, we enter a tangled tension between our students, their texts, their readers, ourselves, our texts, and our readings of their texts. It is a liminal tension, a state, as anthropologist Victor Turner describes, of in-betweenness:

The liminal period is that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another. It is when the initiand is neither what he has been nor is what he will be. Characteristic of this liminal period is the appearance of marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning . . . . (113)

Liminality resides in many human performances meant to offer shifts or transformations—coming-of-age rituals, for example, initiation ceremonies, secluded retreats, or the gentle inadvertant social dramas we enact every day. Because of their ambiguous, inconsistent quality—because they are spaces in which people take risks—liminal places can feel dangerous. Our students slip into our doorways, often alone and afraid and sometimes humiliated, rarely feeling safe about themselves or their work—or our work for that matter. But a liminal experience is, anthropologists Barbara Myerhoff and Deena Metzger remind us, “the great moment of teachability” (106).

Educational anthropologist Peter McLaren describes liminality as “a process in which participants are removed temporarily from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force. The participants are stripped of their usual status and authority; consequently, they come to enjoy an intense comradeship and communion” (17). Liminal spaces are, as many anthropologists observe, “marked by clashes, moments of communion, spontaneity, and insight” (Lavie, Narayan, and Rosaldo 3). Indeed, liminality lurks everywhere in writing centers:

1. Textual Liminality

Writing teachers have learned to encourage in-betweenness in our students’ composing processes. Vygotsky’s “inner speech” (1962), Perl’s “felt sense” (1980), Flower’s “writer-based prose” (1979), Britton’s “expressive writing” (1975), Murray’s “inner voice” (1982) are among composition scholars’ theoretical attempts to describe a kind of liminal state of articulation. These are the healthy habits of first draft writing, liminal texts, that mark movement toward verbal transformation, the “great moment of teachability” in which our student writers begin to articulate meaning for themselves (Sunstein, “Ce Que J’eprouve” 1994 and Fieldworking 1996).
And we’ve learned, too, to respect the value of other alternative kinds of texts—like journal writing. Anthropologists Barbara Myerhoff and Deena Metzger write that the journal is:

... a liminal genre, without conventions, limits, or boundaries, used to travel into liminality where the unknown parts of self and the environment are glimpsed ... as we construe it, is an activity as much as a form—a process, in the course of which a self may be constructed ... the subject contemplates the self, sees it, shapes it acquires self-knowledge by beholding self at a little distance ... Nearly always, serving thus as subject and object, observer and audience, self and other at the same time, the self becomes conscious of the nature of this knowledge, and seeing itself being itself, develops consciousness ... It is the great moment of teachability. (103-106)

If we think about teachability—what happens to tutors and students over time in a writing center, journals and first drafts are tiny pieces in the process of text-making. It is nothing short of constructing an educationally appropriate literate self—a writer “self” who sees her reader “other”; a reader who becomes conscious of the writer “author” speaking to her. One third-year writing center tutor, whose work will follow in more detail, describes her role:

... a listener, a reader, who is invested only in the student’s success, an in-between that a lot of writers don’t have ... I read for a lot of different things now. I don’t just read to find errors which is what I did early on. Sometimes they don’t have their thinking worked out, and that whole concept hit home because of tutoring. I don’t let surface stuff really get to me, and I couldn’t get past the sentence fragments and the punctuation, to even think about what the person was trying to say. And now I’m just the opposite.

Without realizing it, Kim describes herself with language that implies the liminality of it all—she’s “an in-between that a lot of writers don’t have”; she “gets past the sentence fragments” to “think about what the person is trying to say.”

In a poignant statement from an ESL student, Mei-Yu, from Taiwan, we hear another consciousness of textual liminality as she describes her relationship with her writing tutor:
When I began to write, writer’s block almost suffocated me, and often I felt depressed. The discussion between me and Julie (my tutor) helped my writing and my mental health. To write is not only intrapersonal communication but also interpersonal interaction. When I started to write, I was “egocentric” and focused only on what I wanted to express. Julie often reminded me to look at my writing from the reader’s perspective. I began to develop multiple perspectives in writing . . . . People often ask me what language I use to think when I write in English. Am I really able to think in English? Do I translate my thoughts directly from Chinese to English? Or do I mix the two languages? These are hard questions to answer. Looking back at my earlier drafts, I see there were lots of Chinese thoughts written in English words. As language is often connected with culture, my first drafts were often hard to read. I have trouble reading some of my earlier drafts now.

Mei-Yu knows that as she shifts from thinking in one language to another, she is giving voice to a complex cultural shifting—not only of syntax and discourse, but of thinking. As she explores her “intrapersonal communication” and “interpersonal interaction,” as she develops the “multiple perspectives” she identifies, she “mixes languages.” In her own words, taking Chinese thoughts and writing them “in English words” is something she could begin to do in the tutorial space her tutor Julie provided.

2. Pedagogical Liminality

Whether Julie knew she offered Mei-Yu a liminal space or not, the writing center helped to provide her pedagogical liminality. Unlike other school settings, tutoring is intimate; it is one-on-one; it focuses on a writer’s unique crafts and processes, and the record-keeping details relationships of the “in-between” kind. As Muriel Harris observes, “it introduces into the educational setting a middle person, the tutor, who inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher” (“Talking in the Middle” 28).

Several years ago, I conducted an informal study over three years in one tutor’s development. A look at her own records over three years’ time reveals a developing tutor/nnow writing center director’s shifting pedagogy in her own shifting language. Here are some sample entries from the file cards Kim kept after every tutoring session:
Sample of Kim’s Tutoring Notes: Year One:

Tried to stress idea of powerful writing as opposed to train-of-thought final drafts
Worked on changing her organization
Gave him suggestions for study skills
Worked on defining thesis and directing her ideas to work around this

During this first year of tutoring, Kim inventories writing problems. She records what she has done to the student: “changing her organization,” “stress powerful writing as opposed to train-of-thought final drafts,” “defining a thesis and directing her ideas.” She uses a formal voice and records how she tells the student what to do. She assumes that she must move the student toward an ideal paper characterized by a thesis and what she calls “powerful writing as opposed to train-of-thought final drafts.” In her first year as a tutor, when she writes that she “gave him suggestions for study skills,” she acts as an agent for what she understands the college wants for its students.

But Kim’s notes during her second year show a shift. She is no longer merely an agent of the college. She is no longer recording what she’s told the student to do. Instead of inventoring her plans, she records the activity during the session between them. Her pronouns shift from third person to first; she notes the tutorial session not just for what she’s done to the student, but for what they’ve accomplished on a piece of writing together:

Sample of Kim’s Tutoring Notes: Year Two:

We did a run-through of refutation/support
By diagramming structure, we realized it was ineffectually organized
We talked about two ideas—she’ll choose one for revision

By her third year in the writing center, Kim shifts even more toward the student. Her records show that she thinks about what the student needs to do next—and how she’ll help the student form and execute her own plans for the paper. In that third year, she has even moved her physical stance and made it a part of her pedagogy: “I always sit on the same side of the table as the student, not across,” she tells me in an interview, “because we are working together. I work with the student’s pencil, not mine. Pencils are erasable, temporary, draft-like.” In my fieldnotes, I underscore this comment and note that this seems a symbol
of her advocacy of the student, her emerging sense of trust in the student’s ability to make decisions—to “write with her own pencil,” not her tutor’s. Here is a sample of the notes from Kim’s third year, no longer neat strings of comments on file cards. At this point, she records activities more than evaluative comments, and she records the questions she’s asked during her session:

**Sample of Kim’s Tutoring Notes: Year Three:**

Needs to adjust thinking on second half of her paper
Records ten-minute writing exercises students do in sessions
Records questions:
  - Since you haven’t written anything yet, what else can I help you with?
  - What have you decided that you already know?
  - You could do a lead that way, or you could do it upside down
  - What do you think?
  - What did your reader say?
  - What have you learned from this already?

Kim’s shifting pedagogy over three years’ time is a gradual evolution, one which is marked very clearly. No one forces her to change her practice—or even to examine it. But in the liminal space of the writing center, Kim practiced her pedagogy, experimented with it, formed and tested her teaching hypotheses, revised her practices, sharpened her methods, and recorded them.

3. **Spatial Liminality**

The writing center offers spatial liminality which invites physical and interpersonal experimentation. It allows tutors and students to think about such rituals as seating arrangements, writing materials, and the personal ownership of words. It invites us to twist our notions of the writing-paper spaces themselves: what constitutes a draft? a revision? whose writing is this? whose ideas are represented? what is the writing for? who will benefit from this writing?

Without calling it “liminal,” Tom Hemmeter and Carolyn Mee observe three categories of “ethnographic” space in the writing center as students and their tutors (“clients and consultants”) consider and re-map their writing boundaries:
Writing conferences engage three major categories of space, each with its boundary: the interpersonal space of the writing center itself, the broader space of the campus community, and the yet wider space beyond the campus in which relatives, friends, writing specialists, and the clients’ ultimate audience reside. Clients need to be clear about these writing boundaries, and often need to redefine boundaries and redraw maps; consultants need to know the territory of academic writing in order to serve as effective guides . . . . In effect, the consultant is creating space for the client to talk . . . what really needs to happen is for the conversants to leave the paper draft—to close off that space—and to open a new space for discussion. Or another solution is to turn to a different textual space by working on a scrap of paper. (4-5)

4. Cultural Liminality

So the nature of our writing spaces—in the center and on the page—can shift, open to opportunities we create. And with openness comes opportunity for differences to meet—inter-personal difference as students re-work their thinking and their words, intra-personal difference as they work one-to-one with other members of the academy. Carol Severino observes that writing centers can be “linguistic contact zones,” “borderlands” in which cultures and languages—academic and non-academic—meet, meld, or mix:

Those who work in writing centers do indeed witness open wounds and bleeding, although the brutality is usually psychological and metaphorical; the students’ wounds are psychic, their papers and egos are bleeding, their selves as readers and writers are violated. How often do writing center tutors hear tales of students who are “dissed,” their work “trashed” by a harsh system of rewards and punishments? . . . . The writing center invariably becomes a recovery room and trauma center where students come to heal the wounds inflicted on them most likely by those higher on the ladder. (2)

The writing center then is not only a site for the culture wars, but a site for the creation of contact literatures that result from languages and cultures in touch . . . . writing center talk sometimes has a kitchen English rather than an academic English flavor—thus, its borderland nature. (4)

Severino warns that the “culture war” metaphor invites a romantic, exaggerated vision of the student or staff person-as-victim, and argues
that the “linguistic contact zone” is an important heuristic. It is less like a war zone more like a de-militarized zone. The “borderland” metaphor offers a kind of cultural liminality, as I see it. Writing centers use “kitchen English” in order to help students move toward academic English.

In her article, “The Regulatory Role of the Writing Center: Coming to Terms with a Loss of Innocence,” Nancy Grimm observes that writing center workers engage in a myriad of actions to enhance writing (“word making”) and that they should try to seek out people in those places (“committees”) friendly to the writing center to make the institution a better place for the various writers with whom we work. In short, our cultural liminality can serve us, our institutions, and most important, our students’ diversities.

Cultural liminality allows students to think between their multiple cultures, as this Taiwanese graduate student writes as she recalls her experience in an American school:

The main reason that many foreign students are quiet in class is not just because our cultures teach us to be this way but because we are afraid to express ourselves. Some teachers or classmates think we have IQ problems. Nobody wants to be an idiot…. I had a teacher who always compared us with American students and said she could not understand what we wrote. She seldom tried to understand what we expressed on paper, and she often gave us low grades. We were frustrated. Her feedback on papers said that I was handicapped in English. She asked me if I was a good writer in Chinese. I replied yes, but I saw doubt in her eyes. In her mind I had learning problems; I could not handle English or my courses. When I met her in the street, she asked how I was doing in my courses. Her opinion hurt me and broke my confidence. I was lucky to attend the writing lab. My tutor is a teacher who touches my heart deeply because she believes I can do well. This semester I will graduate and leave America. I thank her for her belief in me. I will remember once I had a very good teacher.

For one moment, Hsaing-ching writes, her low-grade, “handicapped” status in the American classroom lifted. In the open space that was her writing lab, she had one good teacher who began to mend her confidence by believing in her abilities.

5. Professional Liminality

Liminality extends, too, out of the small spaces of our writing centers and into our place in the profession at large. For close to two decades, we’ve attempted to explain ourselves and our work to the already
beleaguered profession of composition programs and English departments, even to our own professional organizations (Summerfield, North, Harris). I offer here an illustration.

In a moment reminiscent of many in a writing center, an eleventh-hour panic at the 1989 CCCC, I was presiding at the National Writing Centers Association business meeting and late afternoon panel discussion on the last day of the conference. The hotel meeting room was small, hidden in a corner of a long hallway, and arranged for a small group. The group packed the room—over a hundred—and the room was hot. It didn’t bother us; we all worked in writing centers. In the midst of our discussion, a woman blasted through the door, informing us that there was an outrageous clause in a very important document, a resolution which was scheduled to be discussed and passed the following day. Ironically, the Wyoming Resolution was one of CCCC’s formal attempts to raise consciousness about marginalized part-time composition instructors. Any policy-maker might peek into NCTE’s category “Standards of Good Classroom Practice” and find this statement lying quietly under a small subheading:

The institution should provide the necessary support services for the teaching of writing: writing centers, media service centers, office space, supplies, duplication services, secretarial assistance. (draft of Wyoming Resolution)

Without our own Roman numeral or capital letter in the Wyoming Resolution outline, writing centers hid in a corner with office supplies and media and duplication services, not to mention secretarial assistance and space. In the waning moments of that CCCC Saturday, as the booksellers were disbanding their booths and a convention of electronic game manufacturers was setting up their displays, Jim Upton, Joan Mullin, and I lobbied for a clause of our own. The committee apologized for their oversight and changed it promptly. Under the subheading “Part Two: Teaching Conditions Necessary for Quality Education,” the final revision read:

D. The effectiveness of classroom writing instruction is significantly improved by the assistance students receive in writing centers. Centers provide students with individual attention to their writing and often provide faculty and graduate students with opportunities to learn more about effective writing instruction. Because these centers enhance the conditions of teaching and learning, their development and support should be an important departmental and institutional priority. (336)
We pointed out ourselves to our colleagues; we created a clause of our own. At the time, Jim taught high school in Iowa. Joan taught college in Ohio. I was a teacher of college and high school paused for a few years as a student in New Hampshire. But for that moment, we reacted, we wrote, and we revised. An educational journal might have praised us: high school and college people "articulating" for a change. But in the service of our common commitment to writing centers, none of us was chained to a separate rung on a hierarchical structure. We were writing center people; our boundaries are shifty.

6. Academic and Institutional Liminality

Writing centers develop a lack of boundaries and grow with the metaphor of revision. In a writing center, there's always another chance, another piece of paper, an eraser, a pencil, and a delete key. We find ourselves everywhere and nowhere. We house programs to "write across the curriculum," to serve ESL, LD, and non-traditional students, to link full-time and part-time faculty, to employ students as tutors, to tutor faculty. We conduct workshops in study skills, reading skills and test-taking strategies. In many schools, our centers sit in the spaces that hold computers reserved for students' institutional words—newspapers, literary magazines, flyers and brochures. We learn to count whatever we can count to justify our existence—contact hours, tutorial slots, courses served, papers revised, test scores and GPAs of the helped and the not-helped. We are a place which invites student work, but because our work bears no credit, we often sink our budgets into holes our institutional monies cannot fill.

Sometimes, we must re-name ourselves to exist. Jim Upton's Burlington Iowa High School Writing Center's history tells an institutional story: named "The Write Place," it existed for a few years as a center for writing across the curriculum, staffed by faculty and students and open to anyone who had a paper to write. When the budget cuts came in one lean year, The Write Place was written out of the program. Rather than accept its demise, listening to a school board's latest dictum, "students preparing for the workplace," Upton and his colleagues and staff submitted a proposal to continue under the name "Communications Resource Center." The center continues to this day with its new name.

When we live in blurred disciplines, hidden between institutional budget lines, we must listen, speak, and sometimes redefine ourselves to synchronize with the very structures our centers want to resist. We either allow our institutions to define us, define ourselves and risk extinction, or we become willing to re-define ourselves in order to exist. We welcome the absence of a definable culture yet we are in the presence of one. We
are liminal—neither here nor there—the budgetary, pedagogical hermaphrodites of the academy. But in this space, we achieve a different kind of academic community, and, as Myerhoff and Metzger remind us, respond actively to “great moments of teachability” (106).

Moving the Feast

For those of us who care about students’ writing, we will always peek around academic borders, put out fires, mop up chaos, move from one space to another as we open more spaces for our students’ words. We will grow webbed networks of support, feed them with vigorous talk and productive silence, pad them with blank paper, and warm them with coffee and tea—inside the bodies of our institutions—where risks are our heartbeat and revising is our pulse.

Philosopher Maxine Greene, in The Dialectic of Freedom, reminds us that in order to have freedom to learn, we must have a forum in which to speak and an audience who will listen:

This is what we shall look for as we move: freedom developed by human beings who have acted to make a space for themselves in the presence of others, human beings become challengers ready for alternatives that include caring and community. And we shall seek, as we go, implications for emancipatory education conducted by and for those willing to take responsibility for themselves and for each other. We want to discover how to open spaces for persons in their plurality, spaces where they can become different, where they can grow. (56)

Writing centers will continue to be in such a position: to seek open spaces, understand the value of a liminal state and recognize we’re not always acceptable to the institutions that include (but don’t always include) us. We will, of course, let it continue to bother us. But in our complaints about not belonging, we must realize that it is because we don’t belong that we and our students can sit at the table and move the feast. It is in the not belonging that we can see, listen, talk, read, write and teach.
Works Cited


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